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# SHAKESPEARE

## HIS ETHICAL TEACHING

BY  
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(Author of "HAMLET: A NEW THEORY,"  
"THE ART OF EXTEMPORE SPEAKING," etc.).

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PREFACE. MAIN

BY THE LATE  
H. B. IRVING.

It is a pleasure to me to recommend Dr. Ford's book to the reader. Dealing as it does with the moral influence of Shakespeare, and written in the Author's well-known popular style, it should appeal to a large public of Shakespearean readers. I have much pleasure in recommending a book by an author whose study of "Hamlet" my father commended for the "remarkable freshness" which it gave to that inexhaustible theme.

Among the many commentaries on Shakespeare which the Tercentenary has evoked, Dr. Ford's study on the moral genius of Shakespeare should occupy an honourable and conspicuous place.

TO  
ELLEN TERRY,  
WHOSE HISTRIONIC GENIUS AND SWEET  
WOMANLY CHARM WILL LIVE FOR ALL  
TIME IN THE HEARTS AND MEMORIES  
OF THE ENGLISH-SPEAKING RACE, THIS  
LITTLE WORK IS  
DEDICATED  
BY THE  
AUTHOR.

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PREFACE BY THE LATE H. B. IRVING.

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# SHAKESPEARE: HIS ETHICAL TEACHING.

## CHAPTER I.

### INTRODUCTION.

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MORE devotees have worshipped at the literary shrine of Shakespeare than at that of any other author. His writings contain a mine of untold wealth wherein lie priceless gems to those who delve deep enough for them.

And Shakespearean literature covers so vast a field that there would seem to remain no ground unexplored, certainly nothing startlingly new to be discovered—save that Shakespeare is a myth!

Notwithstanding, the author hopes, if not to throw altogether new light upon the pages of his writings, at least, to focus the light upon what is, perhaps, less obvious to the general reader, by studying him from the standpoint conducive to the highest appreciation of him as one of the world's greatest moral teachers; to show that he did not sit down with no higher aim than to write mere plays to satisfy a vulgar rabble, nor simply to adorn a tale by the matchless beauty of his verse. No, with far loftier aim he points a moral, or enforces some great truth, not by express precept—Shakespeare never preaches—but by the actions and incidents of his dramas as evolved from the characters of his creative brain.

" His teachings are not given in the forms of maxims and apophthegms scattered desultorily over his pages, but are bound up with portraiture of flesh and blood, which the deep humanity of the poet has invested with perpetual life."

As Homer reflects the life of Greece, Dante the religion of modern Europe, so Shakespeare reflects the life of humanity. He is the great portrait-painter of the *soul*. To his magic touch every chord of the human heart vibrates responsive. Every mood and emotion incidental to man's nature is portrayed by him: wit and humour, pathos and tragedy, love and grief, fear and hate, all are found in their highest interpretative expression in the innumerable creations of his transcendent genius.

He has swept through the entire gamut of human nature in all its pulsations of joy and sorrow. He has traversed every labyrinth of the soul. Such is the universality of his genius. He is, indeed,

A man so various, that he seems to be  
Not one, but all mankind's epitome.

" He is a microcosm of all things terrestrial, a perfect orb." From the mirror of his writings are reflected the ever-varying primordial and fundamental passions of men and women as they pass across the stage of human life. It is as though he sat by the wayside of life, and, seeing pass before him the infinite procession of all sorts and conditions of men, his pen had given to each a local habitation and a name—a local habitation more enduring than the cloud-capt towers and gorgeous palaces, and a name that shall endure as long as the world itself shall last.

In each of his great works there is enshrined some

ethical truth, or unobtrusively presented some moral lesson which is interwoven like a golden thread into the texture of the story.

“He opens our eyes to the fair and pure and deep things within the compass of our nature; and their story tells of what we are capable, in our natural capacity as men and as women, strengthened and sweetened by the knowledge of Him in Whom we trust.”

To bring out into relief the ethical significance of his writings is the author's only plea, if such be needed, for adding this to the already multitudinous contributions to Shakespearean literature.

## CHAPTER II.

## HOW TO STUDY SHAKESPEARE.

**I**S it not a reproach to us Englishmen, whose country gave birth to a Poet—the greatest intellectual product of this or any other age—when we see a mad enthusiasm displayed over Jazz dances and other Terpsichorean inanities, which neither appeal to the intellect, nor make for the better morals of a nation, while the dramatic representations of Shakespeare's works receive such scant support as to provoke a feeling akin to dismay at the degeneracy of the public taste?

Yet, thus it is. Shakespeare, in a relative sense, is not popular whether in the study or on the stage; whether read or acted. His plays have not that power of appeal to the popular mind and imagination which his transcendent genius merits.

Next to the Bible, stands Shakespeare in the affections of the English-speaking race. But that affection springs rather from a sense of conscious possession than from any intimate knowledge of the man, and of the heart of the man who spoke as never man spake—save One—to the throbbing heart of humanity.

With a national pride we claim him as our "Great English Poet;" and justifiably so. Yet, in spite of our proud heritage, we lack, as a Nation, that intimate acquaintance with the *mind* of Shakespeare which is attainable only by the earnest, reverent study of the inner meaning that underlies the structure of his work.

By universal consent, he stands unrivalled in the language and literature of the world for the matchless beauty of his verse. We are lost in wonderment at the magic of his words ! But words are only the material with which he has built up the great temple of literary thought within which are enshrined the imperishable ideals of his own soul.

As he wrote there lay before him the Written Book of God, so palpably evident in the structure of his work, and God's great unwritten book of Nature. From these he took his texts, not to write mere plays simply to beguile the tedium of the hour, nor mere poems to satisfy a vulgar rabble, but in order to give to the world the greatest sermons ever conceived by mortal mind, or penned by mortal hand.

The study of Shakespeare in our educational system of to-day is too academic and mechanical to inspire enthusiasm, much less to win our reverence and affection. For this reason he does not stir our emotions as a man who has put his hand upon the pulse of the human race, and interpreted for us its mysteries, its love-pangs, its heart-aches and its death-agonies.

"Shakespeare," writes Arnold Bennett, "is taught in our schools, that is to say, the Board of Education and all authorities pedagogic bind themselves together in a determined effort to make every boy in the land a life-long enemy of Shakespeare."

Yes, we study with punctilious scrupulosity the verbal structure of his works ; we bestow infinite labour upon the mere *technique*—the literary minutiae of his plays, that we fail to discern the moral significance enshrined within the pages of his writings.

You may apply the scalpel of your scientific criticism

to the study of Shakespeare ; you may analyse, dissect, parse and paraphrase the literary scaffolding of the great artificer with all the skill of the practised scientist ; but not by any such mechanical process will you discover the soul of Shakespeare. As well attempt to discover the hidden principle of life—the soul of man—by the anatomical dissection of the human body.

Our methods of teaching Shakespeare are wholly defective.

"The master-dramas of the English language," said a recent writer, "are regarded in most class-rooms as so many passages to paraphrase, so many lines to scan or to parse, so many phrases to elucidate, so many words to look up in the Glossary. 'Macbeth' and the 'Merchant of Venice' appear, not as real live plays to be acted, but as extinct texts to be annotated."

To parse, paraphrase and analyse the grammatical structure of the language is not to know Shakespeare. It may be an intellectual discipline, a mental gymnastic in textual criticism. As such, it may serve its purpose ; but it does not inspire ; it does not admit us into the inner sanctuary of the *mind* of the man whose writings reflect, as in a mirror, the throbbing heart of humanity in all its pulsations of joy and sorrow.

Not that we would discourage the analytical study, but let this be reserved for the more mature student, who will love to pore over his pages, critically dissecting the literary structure of his works with all the passionate ardour of the conscientious student.

But for the beginner, let him read the plays purely and simply for the stories alone, and "for the nonce" throwing the study of *technique* to the winds. Let him

obtain the clearest possible view of the picture contained in the setting of each play, unobscured by the details of the workmanship ; and there will be opened up to him a new world of living human beings, vividly painted by the hand of that genius which has compelled the admiration and wonder of the human race. " The rapid alert reading of one of the great plays," says Walter Raleigh, " brings us nearer to the *heart* of Shakespeare than all the faithful and laudable business of the antiquarian and commentator."

Behind the matchless melody of his verse, his magic wealth of imagery, his unparalleled power of poetic expression, his vivid colouring of scenic representation, stands the man Shakespeare himself. And as a man's character underlies his countenance, and his soul underlies his body, so behind the pages of Shakespeare is the personality of the man, which speaking through its words, discloses to us the mind and heart of the Poet as he thought and felt in the ever-varying moods of human thought and action.

We are so apt to be carried away by the witchery of his words as to lose sight of the deeper significance of the man's writings ; to be so enraptured with the entrancing beauty of the material structure of thought as to miss the true value of the thought itself.

If we would interpret aright the mind of Shakespeare, and understand what is his real meaning and moral intention, we must pluck out the very soul of the man ; we must penetrate deep down to the heart whence rise those smiles and those tears alike, and discover what the secret springs were which moved his nature.

While true to an exact scholarship we must venture beyond the verbal area of diction, structure and dramatic

plan. To gain inspiration from the Poet, we must study the man himself outside the realm of merely textual criticism, uplifting him to that higher plane of thought, whose language becomes instinct with that deeper meaning which issues in the quickening of our intellectual and moral impulses.

In forming our judgment of Shakespearean Drama, we must ever remember that God made Shakespeare a playwright. He wrote primarily for the stage. And it is only when the characters take human form, and live their life upon the stage before our eyes, that there can be adequately revealed to us the potential greatness of any drama.

And thus only can there be disclosed to us the amazing genius of Shakespeare in his illimitable sweep through the entire gamut of human nature ; in his transcendent power of portraying character in the ever-varying activities of human life—when the *dramatis personæ* of his plays are embodied in flesh and blood upon the stage, as mirrored in the drama of actual life. For the power of impressibility through the medium of the living actor far transcends that of the written page, however vivid our imagination be to invest the characters and incidents with all the attributes and realism of life.

“ It is impossible,” wrote Frederic Harrison, “ to judge any drama by reading it. The whole nature of a play of the first rank is transfigured when we see it adequately performed. It is only revealed in acting. *Solvitur ambulando*—a great drama enfolds itself to its catastrophe when we see the characters walk the stage before our eyes—*segniùs irritant animum demissa per aurem*—no imagination can enable us to conceive the

whole force of a really great drama until we *see* it. You might as well try to judge a Symphony of Beethoven by looking at the score. And this is more true of Shakespeare than of any other dramatist ancient or modern.

Shakespeare was a player to the tips of his toes ; and he must be *seen* and *heard* on the stage to be truly known."\*

\* " Among My Books."

## CHAPTER III.

## THE MORAL ELEMENT IN TRAGIC ART.

**T**RAGIC art has always exercised a powerful fascination over the minds and emotions of men. Whether it be Sophoclean or Shakespearean tragedy it takes captive the heart of man, and stirs its emotions to their deepest depths. More than this ; it touches yet deeper springs than those of the emotions ; it penetrates to the inner core of man's moral and spiritual nature.

And herein lies the secret of its mystery, and of its strange fascination over the human mind, namely, in its power of appeal to the spiritual instincts of man, thereby proclaiming him a subject amenable to the moral government of the Supreme Being.

"Surely," as it has been said, "the strongest threads of that fascination can be sprung from nothing less than the moral soul—the conscience, the ethical heart of humanity. In other words, the greatest secret of tragedy lies in touching the spiritual forces of our being, and in working the lower forces in subordination to these, thus making sense subservient still to moral purpose, auxiliary to divine."

It is this moral element which gives to Sophocles and Shakespeare their supreme excellence.

Outside the Bible, there is nothing in all literature which touches so deeply the spiritualities of our inner life as these great masterpieces of the Tragic Muse. Hence, the well-known dictum of Aristotle still holds

true, "that the office and aim of tragedy is to elevate and purify the soul with the emotions of pity and terror."

Our pity is evoked by the temporary triumphs of wickedness. Its innocent victims move us to deepest compassion. And such compassion purifies and elevates, because of its tacit appeal to our inherent moral sense of rectitude. And the form of pity is transfigured or ensouled with moral efficacy. Thus, it becomes a powerful incentive to virtue, by exalting the sacred claims of holiness above all others.

No less present and operative is this moral element in the form of tragic terror. For instance, take the Murder scene, the Banquet scene, and the Sleep-walking scene in the tragedy of "Macbeth." Tragic terror has never been depicted with equal intensity, nor painted with more lurid colours than in these scenes. They reach the climax of tragic art. Conscience, trumpet-tongued, proclaims aloud to Heaven the guilt of the transgressors. It dominates their senses ; it paralyses their inferior faculties. This it is which makes the sublimity of the representation.

Futile are their efforts "to stop up the access and passage to remorse." The "compunctious visitings of nature" prove too mighty for them ; they rise in overwhelming fury against them ; and we lose all other regard for the appalling "soul-convulsions through which their sense of guilt breaks into utterance."

Here, as is usual in tragedy, crime triumphs over virtue and innocence, and for a while retributive justice seems to be dethroned from the moral government of the world. Outwardly, it may appear to be so. Yet it cannot for an instant prevail over the law of retribution that has its seat in the breast of every criminal. Though

the wheels of moral justice drag tardily along, the criminal is never immune from the punishment which dogs his steps, and inevitably follows in the train of wrong-doing. Over the freedom of man, his passions, his guilt, his conscience—over all these there presides, in Shakespeare's ethics, the inexorable law of a just and retributive Providence.

" Though the mills of God grind slowly,  
Yet they grind exceeding small ;  
Though with patience He stands waiting,  
With exactness grinds He all."

This is the underlying moral principle, the prime law of tragic art ; and it is from the strength and virtue of this eternal and immutable law that tragedy draws the life-blood of its interest and power.

And this, as is hereafter shown, is the teaching and genius of Shakespeare, as bodied forth in his immortal tragedies, and which gives to them that perennial interest which must needs outlive all time.

United to Shakespeare's wonderful intuition of art was his unerring moral instinct ; by these he has achieved the great end of Tragedy—the purification of the passions.

To this our own sentiments bear witness in that immediate moral effect which is sensibly produced on the mind by his tragedies. When we pass in review his most prominent creations not a shadow of doubt is left in our minds as to Shakespeare's own ideals, and the ideals he wishes us to sympathize with.

" There is surely some moral scent in us," wrote Dr. George Macdonald, " to let us know whether a man only cares for good from an artistic point of view, or whether he admires and loves good. This admiration

and love cannot be prominently set forth by any dramatist true to his art ; but it must come out over the whole. His predilections must show themselves in the scope of his artistic life, in the things and subjects he chooses, and the way in which he represents them. In Shakespeare there is no suspicion of a cloven foot. Everywhere he is on the side of virtue and of truth.”\*

\* “A Dish of Oats.”

## CHAPTER IV.

## THE MORAL GENIUS OF SHAKESPEARE.

WE all acclaim Shakespeare to be a *genius*. But what constitutes genius baffles our power to define. It is a supreme intellectual endowment—a breath from Heaven. As such, it can neither be acquired nor transmitted, but is congenital or inherent in the person possessing it. Thus much we know. It is an intangible, impalpable something, call it what we may, but none the less a living force which is made real to us by the intellectual response which it evokes.

This Shakespeare had in a super-eminent degree—an *intellectual genius*.

But he was something more than an intellectual genius. There is more in him than intellect; there is an unconscious breath and power which transcends mere intellect—an alchemy which turns all metals into gold. "It is a quality so real and yet so subtle, so entrancing yet so impalpable, that, when present, it forces from us the acknowledgment of its transcendent force and reality." Thus we intuitively distinguish between certain works: of some we can affirm, "These belong to the class of inspired works"; of others, "These lack inspiration." For instance, we recognize the inspiration of the *Divina Commedia* of Dante, the *Hamlet* of Shakespeare, the *Paradise Lost* of Milton, the *Prometheus* of Aeschylus; but we should never dream of applying the word inspiration to *Gulliver's Travels*, or the *Proverbial Philosophy* of Tupper, or Carlyle's

*Revolution*, though they be unquestionably the recognized products of *intellectual* genius. And it is this inspirational power, super-added to his transcendent power of intellect, which was his supreme gift, and which makes Shakespeare a *Moral Genius*, and the greatest ethical teacher, outside the Bible, ever born among the sons of men.

The *inspiration* of Shakespeare, like his genius, compels our homage. It appeals to the spirit of man and evokes in us what is highest and best. By it our souls are "touched to fine issues."

It is an ethical quality which, like genius, eludes definition ; but of whose existence we are conscious in that breath of life, that warm and vital force whose subtle influence quickens our moral impulses, inspires us with nobler ideals, and uplifts us to a higher plane of thought and action.

Shakespeare's works are largely endowed with a spiritual morality, and it is to this pervasive moral power which exhales from his pages that we attribute his undying fame and popularity. And this purely moral element contributes more to what we call genius than we are generally wont to admit.

No mere preponderance of intellectual power can sufficiently account for the operation of that faculty which we recognize in the highest forms of genius. We call it *inspiration*—the inbreathing of a spirit akin to, yet superior to our own, a living power which lies outside the sphere of mere intellect, but whose influence is made real to us in the realm of the *spiritual*. And "as love answers to love, eager yet afraid, so does man's soul recognize inspiration when it comes."

It is the inbreathing of that mysterious spirit, that—  
Bloweth where it listeth ; and thou hearest the sound thereof,  
But canst not tell whence it cometh, or whither it goeth.

In addition to whatever other claims Shakespeare's works may have on our admiration, they must also possess some " soul of goodness " in that unquestionable moral preservative by which they live down through the ages, and in virtue of which they are imperishable in the world of literature.

A very cursory view of the greatest authors, whose works are a living force in the world of letters, will suffice to convince the unprejudiced mind that the perennial freshness of all that is imperishable in literature is due not to the power and beauty alone of genius, but to the endowment of its ethical quality, that spiritual morality by which it outlives the storms of time.

By what wizardry of power, then, did Shakespeare pour forth from the rude Play-House a Poetry which at once took the world captive, and which after the lapse of three centuries still holds it in thrall ? On what rests his never-dying fame ?

Not on his intellectual or dramatic genius alone ; but on his interpretation of those fundamental principles which underlie the moral government of the world, and in obedience to which man, potentially good, can alone achieve what is, and become actually good, and thus fulfil his proper destiny in the world as an immortal being with immortal hopes.

What of vice is contained in his works is the *vitium temporis*, not the *vitium hominis*. It belonged more to the age in which he lived than to the man himself, and was contracted by the contagious circumstances in

which it was his lot to live, but which, on his own confession, oppressed no man with a heavier burden of sorrow than it did Shakespeare himself.

In his Sonnets, admittedly the only trustworthy biography of his inner life, which throw light on the soul of Shakespeare, we find him lamenting the debasing associations into which he was inevitably drawn by the very nature of his public calling, and their baneful influence on his character.

They disclose to us overpowering personal emotions under which he laboured.

Listen to the plaint of his heart in the following lines :—

When in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes,  
I all alone beweepe my outcast state,  
And trouble deaf Heaven with my bootless cries,  
And look upon myself, and curse my fate.

He describes himself as

Made lame by fortune's dearest spite.

He pathetically laments that he has

Made himself a motley to the view,\*

And craves our pity because fortune is—

The guilty goddess of my harmful deeds  
That did not better for my life provide,  
Than public means, which public manners breeds.  
Thence comes it that my name receives a brand,  
And almost thence my nature is subdu'd  
To what it works in like the dyer's hand :  
Pity me, then, and wish I were renew'd ;  
Whilst, like a willing patient I will drink  
Potions of eysell 'gainst my strong infection ;  
No bitterness that I will bitter think,  
Nor double penance, to correct correction.  
Pity me then, dear friend.

Impurities there are which pollute the pages of his dramas, and which a *dilettante* æstheticism would fain blot out.

Such an attempt was made about 80 years ago, when an expurgated edition of Shakespeare's plays was issued by a philanthropist whose religious zeal outran his better judgment. Every coarse and indelicate jest found in the dialogue of the plays was scrupulously excised.

"But the task, when accomplished," says Canon Ainger, "in fact redounded to Shakespeare's honour, for it proved that even under the sweeping scissors of Mr. Bowdler, the removal of such passages did not reduce the bulk of Shakespeare's work by a hundredth part, and in no way left the remainder injured or weakened in the process."\*

More than this, Mr. Bowdler applied the scalpel of his literary and pietistic criticism, by eliminating any Biblical or religious sentiment which shocked his moral sense as unfit to be read in families.

But with a saner and more equitable judgment we have come, though tardily, to recognize the moral grandeur of Shakespeare, not by focussing the light of our textual criticism upon the relatively few and insignificant moral blemishes which, it is alleged, tarnish the escutcheon of his fair name, and detract from the purity of his writings, but by viewing his work as a *whole* in the light of an honest, candid and impartial criticism, which scorns to pass an adverse and unjust judgment upon him, by suborning as witnesses the *ex parte* evidence of a few detachable texts, which grossly

\* "Shakespeare Sermons."

misinterpret the mind and moral intention of Shakespeare which underlies his plays.

We do not claim for Shakespeare infallibility. The best of men is at best but human. Human frailty has been the heritage of man from the Dawn of Creation downwards ; and Shakespeare was not immune, but a man of like passions with ourselves. We must attribute to him the like human condition.

Notwithstanding his frailties, which we make no attempt to condone, his pages reflect the highest Christian morality. Outside the Inspired Volume, there can be found no more exalted conceptions of God, or of all that is good and beautiful in His Universe ; no loftier ideals of life as incentives to virtue ; no nobler scorn of things base and ignoble than are enshrined in the writings of Shakespeare.

And to such heights of moral grandeur does he, at times, rise in some of his sublimer passages, that there is irresistibly forced upon us the conviction that he wrote in the "conscious over-shadowing of that same Spirit, from under whose cloud-veiled majesty on the Mount issued the eternal politics of Heaven."

## CHAPTER V.

## SHAKESPEARE'S IDEAL OF WOMANHOOD.

**A**LUMINOUSLY outstanding feature of Shakespeare's ethics is his lofty moral ideal of true womanhood as exhibited in his female characters. In this connection we recall to mind Ruskin's beautiful passage in "Sesame and Lilies," in which he alludes to the fact that, in the strict sense of the word, Shakespeare has no heroes—only heroines.

"There is not one entirely heroic figure," he says, "in all his plays, except the slight sketch of Henry V. . . . Whereas there is hardly a play that has not a perfect woman in it, stedfast in grave hope and errorless purpose: Cordelia, Desdemona, Isabella, Hermione, Imogen, Queen Catherine, Perdita, Sylvia, Viola, Rosalind, Helena, and last and perhaps loveliest Virgilia, are all faultless, conceived in the highest heroic type of humanity."

Shakespeare invests them with a halo of perfectibility. They exhale an atmosphere of saintliness, so divine are his female creations whom he so richly endows with the attributes of love, purity, innocence, fidelity and constancy.

Ruskin suggests a flawless perfection of character in woman—"infallibly faithful and wise counsellors, incorruptibly just and pure examples, strong always to sanctify, even when they cannot save"—in a way not possible to men:

But are women really flawlessly perfect in character?

Is it not rather, that this was Shakespeare's chivalric ideal of a good woman? Not that woman in herself, *per se*, is perfect, but that Shakespeare *thought* her so.

Out of his own chivalrous soul was evolved his lofty conception of womanhood. From his own innate reverence for woman sprang those matchless creations of noble heroic women over whom he has thrown the glamour of his genius, and which have won for him the wonder and admiration of the world.

And this is the more remarkable when we consider the environment amidst which he lived and wrote.

As playwright and actor, he lived in the very heart of London life and theatrical life which is known to have been in Elizabeth's day coarse, corrupt, feculent. Added to this, he had before him, as artist, the models of Elizabethan dramatists, notably, the superb but vicious genius of Marlowe; and yet he preserved through life, inviolate and inviolable, the same high sense of reverence for the divinity and sacredness of womanhood—the same chivalric ideal of a good woman, and which translated into words by the jesting Lucio in "Measure for Measure" describes the saintly Isabella—in her virginal strength and purity, perhaps the noblest of all his female creations:—

I hold you as a thing ensky'd and sainted;  
By your renouncement an immortal spirit  
And to be talked with in sincerity,  
As with a Saint.

This lofty moral ideal of womanhood is never dethroned from his heart. It is his to the end of his days. "In the 'Winter's Tale,' one of his latest plays," writes the late Bishop Stubbs, "he draws for us the gracious simplicity, the wisely perfection of Hermione; and in

'The Tempest,' the latest of his plays, the peerless purity, the maiden sweetness of the most admired Miranda with an almost divine light and glamour. In the long history of the English Poetic ideals of womanhood—from the Juliana of Cynewulf, the typical heroine of our northern forbears, generous and gentle and winning, but firm of character, resolute of will, royal of bearing, down to Wordsworth's immortal picture of

A perfect woman, nobly planned  
To warn, to comfort and command  
And yet a spirit still, and bright  
With something of an angel light,

there is no poet in the brilliant roll who has wrought more nobly, more christianly, than Shakespeare, in fashioning that ideal which I doubt not is enshrined in all our hearts to-day."\*

Dowden quotes from Rümelin, "Shakespeare Studien," a statement, that in consequence of his position as a player, Shakespeare "was excluded from the acquaintance of women of fine culture and character, and therefore drew upon his fancy for his female portraits. At the same time Shakespeare shared with Goethe, Petrarch, Dante, Rousseau, Jean Paul (a strange assemblage !) a mystical veneration for the feminine element of humanity as the higher and more divine."†

To Shakespeare woman was a paragon of moral perfection. Not woman in the abstract, but woman in the concrete ; not woman as inhabiting an ideal world of unattainable perfection, but woman as living in the world of everyday life, who to him became transfigured

\* "The Christ of English Poetry."

† "Shakespeare : His Mind and Art."

by his innate sense of veneration for the divine element in true womanhood.

To Shakespeare woman is infinitely superior to, and grander than man, because he revered in her true womanhood, and assigned to her her transcendent power as a moral force in human life. He represents her as potentially greater than man, not in the realm of fancy, but in the actual world of flesh and blood, where woman becomes greater than man in the God-like elevating influence which she exercises on the God-creature man.

To the man who truly loves, the world is a paradise where, as in the golden dawn of creation, woman comes to him with the melody of love, rippling with tones of human affection. Her whole life is a song of love. Let man but come within the zone of her influence, and he attains to the God-like.

This is woman, as painted by Shakespeare, resplendent in all the christian graces of true womanhood—woman as realized in the world of fact where she assumes her rightful position in her relation to man in human life.

Let her but meet her affinity in life, let her but

Set herself to man,

Like perfect music unto noble words.

And in the long years liker must they grow ;

The man be more of woman, she of man :

He gain in sweetness and in moral height . . .

She mental breadth, nor fail in childward care.

Self reverent each, and reverencing each,

Distinct in individualities,

But like each other ev'n as those who love.\*

So sang Tennyson.

The virginal strength and purity of woman is to be found not in a world remote from man, but in a world

\* Tennyson : " The Princess."

where they "twain shall be one flesh"; where woman fulfils her appointed destiny, and in her rightful relation to man, lays at his feet her tribute of love, evoking what is highest and best in him, and leading him to nobler endeavours, and to the highest moral achievements.

"The catastrophe of every play," wrote Ruskin, "is caused always by the fault or folly of a man; the redemption, if there be any, is by the wisdom and virtue of a woman, and failing that there is none."

And this is the philosophy of Shakespeare.

The power of woman over the soul of man is the distinguishing mark in Shakespearean drama. Her power for good or evil is illimitable as a transfiguring moral influence over man. If she be a bad woman, she may grasp the soul of a man and drag him down until he stands knocking at the very gates of Hell. But even at Hell's gates a woman purer than she can grasp his soul and drag him back again until she binds his soul for ever to the great Throne of God.

Indeed, so clearly defined is the power of Shakespeare's women that woman is the determining factor whether the play be a Comedy or a Tragedy. If she be a bad woman the play is always a Tragedy. If she be a good woman the play is always a Comedy. Hence the philosophy of life—"It is woman that saves or damns the world."

In none of the plays is this more clearly illustrated than in a "Winter's Tale," where through four acts the unreasoning jealousy and obstinacy of Leontes must inevitably issue in tragedy but for the redemptive power and patience of the gentle and queenly Hermione, and the play becomes a Comedy.

On the other hand, "Romeo and Juliet" has all the essential marks of a Comedy. But Juliet with all her maiden sweetness and qualities of heart, is not in the strict ethical sense of the word a good woman. A beautiful and passionate nature, love's fever ran riot in her blood, and made the "sweet natured girl a deceitful, scheming liar," and the play becomes not a Comedy, but a Tragedy.

"Measure for Measure" has all the elements of a Tragedy, painful and poignant. But Isabella, with her white passion of purity and of indignation against sin, arrests the tragic progress of the play, and transforms it into a Comedy.

In the opening scenes of "Othello" nothing in them points to Tragedy; everything bodes a cloudless and sorrowless future, with not a shadow to darken the heaven of Othello's and Desdemona's happiness. But Desdemona, "sweet as an angel, pure as a woman should be," has forgotten the golden sphere of woman, and disdains not to deceive her father, and upon her falls the judgment for her treachery to her father, and Tragedy is the result.

In no literature in the world can there be found such creations of feminine loveliness as in Shakespeare's golden realm of womanhood; not poetic abstractions, nor creations of unattainable angelic perfection, but women of flesh and blood, of like passions with ourselves.

He extols, as no other writer has done, the potential greatness of woman. To him she is divinely great, because divinely human and divinely *woman*; not the modern feminist conception of womanhood which dewomanizes woman, by divesting her of those attributes

of true, sweet and gracious womanhood which constitute her chief charm, and which alone can evoke what is highest and best in man's moral and spiritual nature.

Woman, potentially great, only becomes great, not when she aspires to rival or to assume an ascendancy over man ; but when she lays at his feet her tribute of love, and yields a willing and loyal submission to him, a submission not of servility exacted by any exaggerated claims of superiority of sex, but of wifely fealty to her lord, in the exquisite gentleness, tenderness and goodness of her affectionate nature, by which she wins over him a quiet supremacy, to which he offers in return that which is her due—man's loving and dutiful homage.

This is Shakespeare's philosophy, an idealized ethical conception of woman.

## CHAPTER VI.

## SHAKESPEARE: HIS ETHICAL TEACHING.

**I**T is on the pages of Shakespeare's great Tragedies that his ethical teaching is most luminously written. It is enforced not by express and direct precepts, not by set dogma and maxim, but is vividly incarnated in the characters of his dramas, in living men and women, through the medium of words made flesh.

"He does not," says Dowden, "deal with precepts or moral reflections, or practical applications. He is an artist, but an artist who grasps truth largely. The ethical truth lives and breathes in every part of his work, as artist, no less than the truth to things sensible and presentable to the imagination."\*

Shakespeare was no priest in an ecclesiastical sense. He waved no censer. Yet, his teaching has left a profound and permanent influence upon the moral and intellectual life of the nation.

He was the great portrait-painter of the *soul* of man. On every individual soul he saw something of the Divine Impress—blurred or defaced though it be by the spirit of evil; yet, never wholly obliterated. He traces for us with the unerring hand of genius the outlines of the Divine Image, making it visible to us even amid the awfulest moral wreck and ruin which sin has wrought upon the human soul.

\* "Shakespeare : His Mind and Art."

The luminously outstanding theme of his Tragedies, which runs like a golden thread through the texture of the plays, is that man is potentially great, but, actually, only so far as he reaches those spiritual heights attainable by man, and which are accessible to him only along the tortuous path of triumphant victory over the forces of evil.

To restore in man the lost Image of his Maker—the Divine in the human—may be the dream of a visionary ; not so with Shakespeare. It is the function alike of Prophet, Priest and Poet.

In the realm of ethics he insists on the supremacy of human character in determining man's destiny. Character alone with him is eternal, that which alone will outlive all time. With him man's destiny is fixed not by inexorable fate, but by character—the impress on the soul of the free choice of good or evil which man makes through life. And in man's power of volition Shakespeare saw the potential greatness of man ; that, endowed with freedom of will, he has the capacity of choice—the power to choose the good, and to reject the evil ; and that on that power alone hung the issues of man's eternal destiny.

“ Religion in its deepest sense,” said the late Bishop Stubbs, “ is never absent from his world.

There's a divinity that shapes our ends  
Rough-hew them how we will,

is of the very essence of his creed. But the Divinity is the Divinity of the moral law, supreme throughout the universe. The ultimate power, in fact, in his tragic world is the power of moral order. That supremacy is acknowledged by Shakespeare in the minutest as well as in the greatest concerns of human life. Character,

indeed, with him is the one thing which is eternal. It is character, not circumstance, which determines destiny. No inexorable fate broods over the actions of men and women in Shakespeare's plays as in the great Tragedies of Ancient Greece. The only fatality which rules in Shakespearean drama is the fatality of character, and even then it is a fatality which is entirely consonant with the freedom of the human will. A single act, the act of a single day, the act of a single hour, may fix the fate of an entire life, but in that day or hour the man was free, and the sole arbiter of his own destiny. The drama of Shakespeare, in one word, is the drama of individuality."\*

To some ethical teachers life is but a tangled web, a welter of conflicting forces, an ethical blunder, with no moral purpose behind it.

On the surface of things it may appear to be so. But Shakespeare saw with the prophet's vision that under all the complexity of life, one law, and that a moral one, is ever at work ; that there is a moral order operative in the affairs of men ; that beneath the surface of our common life, and working through it, is a power making for righteousness ; that behind the tangled skein of our complex life is the Invisible Hand of Deity interweaving all its intricacies into one ultimate and harmonious whole.

To this, the moral impression which Shakespeare makes upon the mind bears abundant testimony.

" Shakespeare was certainly a strong believer in God," says A. C. Benson, " and in the Divine government of the world, though there are also moods when he seems

\* " The Christ of English Poetry."

to think of the world as a place left mysteriously unguided and unhelped by the Heavenly Powers."

Such it would seem as when he writes,

As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods,  
They kill us for their sport.

But he is no cynical philosopher ; his is no pagan creed. Words such as these do not reflect the mind of Shakespeare in its general outlook upon the world with its dark and unfathomable mysteries of life.

"Such passages," said the late Bishop Boyd Carpenter, "are rare, and they rather reflect what the figure in the play would naturally say than what Shakespeare himself would necessarily endorse. They are casual, not personal utterances."

They are but the passionate outburst of resentment against the cruel injuries of man to man that make the tragedies of life, and which weighed so heavily upon his soul as at times to draw forth the utterance of moral indignation.

Such moods come to most men when, oppressed with an overwhelming sense of their futility to solve the riddle of the Universe, and to harmonise life's discords, their faith in a Supreme and Beneficent Ruler is shaken by the dark and baffling mysteries of sin and suffering which enshroud our life, and when, in the agony of darkness if not of despair, we cry, "Does God care?"

And Shakespeare shared in common with men this feeling of revolt against the order of things which men in all ages have felt, and to which the Poets have given such eloquent testimony. Notwithstanding, he realised that behind all the mystery and the darkness was the Great Unseen but Beneficent Controller working out with unerring wisdom His Sovereign Purpose.

"Poetic justice" is not universally realised in this world ; nor is it in Shakespeare. The seemingly inequitable distribution of rewards and punishments has perplexed the minds of men of all ages. It baffled the mind of a Hebrew Poet who complained of the evil world which comes "in no misfortune like other folk, which have their portion in this life, children at their desire, and leave the rest of their substance for their babes."

Shakespeare, though he offers no solution of the vexed problem of good and evil, yet recognises the moral constitution of nature, by insisting on the supremacy of moral goodness, and the ultimate defeat of evil ; that the unbridled passions of men when uncontrolled by the law of man's higher nature lead inevitably to damnation and death ; that though wickedness may seem temporarily to have dethroned the good, yet goodness still reigns supreme in the moral world. The good remains good, and goodness is the more radiant because of the gloom which cannot extinguish it.

On ethical grounds, it has been objected that a certain play contains no character for which we can feel any sympathy or love, and that such a play must, therefore, be unfavourable to morality. But a play which exhibits an unmixed element of evil without any alleviating vision of good is not necessarily unfavourable to morality. Certainly not if it evokes neither sympathy nor love for that which is evil. The test of the *ἡθός* of a play is the impression it leaves upon the mind.

No one whoever came into contact with the arch-villain, Iago, or the Gorgons, Regan and Goneril, was moved with admiration for such characters, much less by any impulse to emulate or imitate them. No, we

instinctively repudiate them ; our whole moral nature recoils from them as from something morally loathsome ; and the more vividly such characters are portrayed on the stage, the intenser become our feelings of abhorrence.

This is the *ῥθος* of Shakespearean Tragedy ; this is the impression produced upon the morally sensitive minds of those who yield themselves to the influence of the great Tragedies of Shakespeare. It is, that there is

Some soul of goodness in things evil,

Could we but observingly distil it out ;

that evil is destructive, destructive alike of its author, and, alas ! sometimes of the innocent and the good. This stirs to the depths our resentment of the evil, and makes us hate the evil with a more bitter hatred.

Hatred of evil is undeniably evoked and intensified by the Tragedies of Shakespeare, and this is the genius and teaching of Shakespeare which makes him a great moral teacher and a great moral force for all time.

“ Whatever else,” said Bishop Stubbs, “ may be true of the ethical ideas of Shakespeare, certainly he had, consciously or unconsciously, the christian idea of the potential greatness of man, of the inherent dignity of human nature. This is plain all through his Tragedies. His heroes may fail horribly, may even fall into detestable crime, but they have all a touch of greatness about them. In the worst of them we feel always the potentiality of the good behind the evil ; in the best of them we realise the full power and reach of the human soul ; and in each case because of the potentiality we are stirred not only to admiration and terror and awe, but also to sympathy and pity.”\*

Though no precise system of ethics be deducible from

\* “ The Christ of English Poetry.”

Shakespeare's writings, notwithstanding, a lofty moral tone pervades them. They scintillate with the spirit of true Christian teaching which may be said to distil as dew from the pages of his works.

His plays are luminous with profound moral wisdom. The religious Spirit of New Testament ethics pervades them. "The eternal verities of God's revelation," said Dean Farrar "are scarcely ever out of sight."

In many a golden passage is revealed a noble scorn of things evil, and the inherent majesty of goodness is disclosed to us as the one supreme thing to be sought after, even amid the temporary triumphs of wickedness. From him we learn the lessons of life as God has made it.

As the Bible was one of the few books to which Shakespeare had access, so in hundreds of passages he illustrates with incomparable power its deepest truths. His plays furnish conclusive evidence of an intimate acquaintance with the Bible : they are instinct with the religious life of Christianity.

"One of the principal influences that moulded and guided his intellect, one of his greatest teachers was the Bible. It is not only apparent in the tone of his morality, but in the manner of it also. Both the spirit and the letter bear witness. It has left its impress not only on his mind, but on his idiom, on the exquisite simplicity of his diction, and on the intense *homeliness* with which he brings his truths to bear on men's "business and bosoms," while his innumerable allusions, direct and indirect, to Scripture History, persons, places, events, doctrines, parables, precepts, and even phrases, discover a familiarity with the Bible that proves it must have been eminently the book after his own heart."\*

\*James Brown : "Bible Truths with Shakespearean Parallels."

"His mind," said the saintly Bishop Charles Wordsworth, "was saturated with the Bible." This is accounted for by the contemporaneousness of the Authorised Version and the plays.

His writings are redolent of the religious spirit which exhales from his pages, in that essential aroma of the passage he reproduces, without making any direct use of the words themselves, that is, less in direct quotations than in those allusions to sacred truths which are scattered over his pages like fragrant flowers culled from the garden of God's Word.

Innumerable passages there are in the plays which to us had been more or less unintelligible but for some acquaintance with the New Testament.

And it is this pervading quality of allusiveness to sacred things, so evident in his writings, which argues a profound knowledge of the Bible which he possessed. He had imbibed the spirit of New Testament teaching from its fountain head.

That he was conversant with the Scriptures is too self-evident to be refuted. More than this. We affirm that he had a *profound* knowledge of the Bible. No mere verbal knowledge would suffice to justify the use of the word "profound"; but a knowledge which penetrates below the external surface of words to the inner depths of their spiritual meaning, and which manifests itself not in direct textual quotations, but rather in the essential spirit of the passages he reproduces, in that *ἥθος* of Christian morality as reflected from the pages of Holy Writ.

This Shakespeare had—a spiritual insight—which transcends the mere verbal area of textual knowledge,

and makes his words instinct with that deeper significance which quickens our moral and spiritual impulses.

“What is remarkable in the employment of these passages,” said George Macdonald, “is not merely that they are so present to his mind that they come up for use in the most exciting moments of composition, but that he embodies the spirit of them in such a new form as reveals to minds saturated and deadened with the *sound* of the words, the very visual image and spiritual meaning involved in them.”

## CHAPTER VII.

SHAKESPEARE : HIS ETHICAL  
TEACHING—*continued.*

**I**T is through the study of the plays as a *whole*, through the characters, those living portraiture of flesh and blood, that the lessons of the true significance and solemnity of life are most vividly enforced.

The two great fundamental truths luminously outstanding from his pages are, that the inherent majesty of goodness is the one supreme thing to be sought after ; and that wrong-doing always carries with it its own punishment as the natural outcome of human deeds.

"He never conceals the conviction that what men sow, that must they reap ; and this, not merely in his Tragedies, but in his lighter vein of Comedy : that frivolity in a Mercutio, unreality in a Jacques, genial sensuality in a Falstaff, must have their Nemesis."

But it is in those great revealing flashes and intense emotions that there comes to us the true meaning of life. Great as are the Historic Plays they do not rise to the incomparable grandeur of his later Tragedies, where dazzling passions vacillate between virtue and vice.

It is in his Tragedies that he deals with the tremendous problems of human life and destiny, and in each of these he makes the central problem a moral one. And the resultant tragedy is always found to be the inevitable outcome of moral evil wrought by the folly or fault of man.

"In his Tragedies," says Professor Bradley, "the main source of the convulsion which produces suffering and death is never good. The main source is in every case evil, and what is more (though this seems to have been little noticed) it is in almost every case evil in the fullest sense— not mere imperfection, but plain moral evil."

What moved the heart of Shakespeare to its deepest depths was not the unexplained mysteries or phenomena of the physical world, but the vexed problem of the moral world. The abounding wickedness in the world ; the cruel wrongs inflicted by man against man. Against these his mind rose in revolt ; against " the oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely." This it is which saddens his soul :—

The spurns

That patient merit of the unworthy takes.

The unbridled passions, the criminal ambitions, the spurned opportunities of life, the culpable follies of men which have brought about some of the tragedies of life—these are the things which inflamed his soul with a righteous and burning indignation, and which are luminously written across the pages of his Tragedies.

Take, for instance, those of the plays which for the most part belong to the closing epoch of his life, viz., *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Othello*, *Measure for Measure*, and *Antony and Cleopatra*. Into them he has poured his most Titanic conceptions of the evil of the world and what it means.

In *Hamlet* the tragedy springs from adultery in the past. In *Macbeth* it is criminal ambition. In *Othello* it is the poison of slander. In *Measure for Measure* it is the sin of sensuality. In *Antony and Cleopatra* it is illicit love. In *The Merchant of Venice* it is religious bigotry.

Thus, it is moral evil in one or other of its many Protean shapes that produces the pains and penalties which issue in the resultant tragedy.

## I.—HAMLET.

### *Theme*—ADULTERY.

*Hamlet* is admittedly the sublimest, as it is the most intellectual of all Shakespeare's plays. But it is not merely a "Tragedy of Thought": it is more. It is a profound study of character—a drama of the soul and the world in which the moral and spiritual elements predominate.

It is the moral and spiritual history of a pure and lofty soul in its interminable conflict with the powers of evil in the world which it would fain renounce.

The spiritualization of the play was the end towards which the final touches of the Poet tended, and for which he laboured so long, withdrawing it from time to time for special study. And it is this new feature impressed upon it by Shakespeare which redeems it from the original rude form in which it was cast.

Under his hand it is transformed from a bald story of blood and revenge into a profound study of human character; the plot depending not on the accomplishment of any plan of revenge, but on the unfolding of Hamlet's lofty and spiritual nature amid an environment with which it is in antagonism.

The tragedy of the play arises from adultery in the past.


In Hamlet's first soliloquy he lifts aside the veil and admits us into the inmost sanctities of his soul, and there reveals to us the meaning of that settled melancholy,



through which he looks out upon the world, and sees it transformed into an unweeded garden where only things "rank and gross in nature" grow.

His vision is distorted through his "mother's" lust, and the unseemly haste of her union with one whose mental and moral depravity can but dishonour the memory of the father he held so dear.

Observe how his indignation struggles for utterance, and annihilates time in the breathless tumult of his soul :—

O, that this too too solid flesh would melt,  
Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew !  
Or, that the Everlasting had not fix'd  
His canon 'gainst self-slaughter ! O God ! God !  
How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable,  
Seem to me all the uses of this world !  
Fie on't, oh fie ! 'tis an unweeded garden  
That grows to seed ; things rank and gross in nature  
Possess it merely. That it should come to this !  
But *two months* dead ! nay, not so much, *not two* :  
So excellent a King ; that was, to this,  
Hyperion to a Satyr ; so loving to my mother  
That he might not beteem the winds of Heaven  
Visit her face too roughly. . . .

 within a month—  
Let me not think on't—Frailty, thy name is woman !  
*A little month, or ere those shoes were old*  
With which she follow'd my poor father's body.  
Like Niobe, all tears : . . . .

  within a month ;  
Ere yet the salt of most unrighteous tears  
Had left the flushing in her gall'd eyes,  
She married.

Here is struck that low minor chord whose melancholy strain we hear reverberating throughout the entire play. The thought is ever uppermost in his mind ; his frame is ever vibrating from the shock. This it is which,

operating upon a heart so exquisitely sensitive to feel and to resent a moral wrong, imparts to his whole demeanour a melancholy sadness, and which momentarily suggests to his mind self-slaughter as a welcome means of escape from this otherwise fair world of God's. Here are a sickness of life, even a longing for death, so intense that nothing stands between Hamlet and suicide except religious awe inspired by " God's canon 'gainst self-slaughter."

As yet no disclosure had been made to him of his father's murder ; nor any burden of revenge been imposed upon him, nor any thought conceived by him of feigning madness. These considerations could not, therefore, have induced his present mental condition.

His mother's adulterous marriage is the canker-worm gnawing at his heart, which is full to breaking point. Pathetically he exclaims :—

It is not, nor it cannot come to, good :

But break my heart, for I must hold my tongue.

In his extreme isolation of soul, to none may he unburthen his heart, save to that one stedfast friend, Horatio, who, incidentally alluding to his father's funeral, is met with a gentle irony, which betrays the bent of his thoughts :—

*Hor. :* My lord, I came to see your father's funeral.

*Ham. :* I pray thee do not mock me, fellow-student,  
I think it was to see my *mother's wedding*.

*Hor. :* Indeed, my lord, it followed hard upon.

*Ham. :* Thrift, thrift, Horatio : the funeral baked meats  
Did coldly furnish forth the *marriage tables*.

The crisis of Hamlet's life was his mother's second marriage. This it was which wrought such bitter and cruel consequences upon his mind and feelings.

Hamlet was an enthusiast ; and his love for his father was no common-place filial affection, but a love deep,



*Hamlet.*

Soft you now !  
The fair Ophelia ! Nymph, in thy orisons,  
Be all my sins remember'd.

*Hamlet.* Act III. Scene i.

*From a drawing by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, recently acquired by the  
British Museum.*

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intense, idealistic, partaking of the nature of hero-worship, deifying in its vehemence the object of its devotion.

See what a grace was seated on this brow ;  
Hyperion's curls, the front of Jove himself,  
An eye like Mars to threaten and command ;  
A station like the herald Mercury,  
New-lighted on a Heaven-kissing hill ;  
A combination and a form indeed,  
Where every god did seem to set his seal  
To give the world assurance of a man.

The eloquence of human affection could extol to no higher heights than are attained by him whose true nobility of manhood is here confirmed by the sealed attestation of the gods !

To him his mother was equally dear. His love for her is apparent in the inverted characters of his rage and grief. In her he revered true wifhood and womanhood.

Commensurate with his love is his inconsolable grief at his father's death—a grief rendered trebly poignant by the treason to his sacred memory alike by the unchastity and indecorous haste of his mother's marriage. Her's is an act at which the very Heavens blushed with shame :—

Such an act  
That blurs the grace of modesty ;  
Calls virtue hypocrite ; takes off the fair rose  
From the fair forehead of an innocent love  
And sets a blister there. . . .

*Heaven's face doth glow,*  
Yea, this solidity and compound mass,  
With tristful visage, as against the doom,  
Is thought-sick at the act !

This profanation of the sacredness of life, and the sanctity of love, chills the life-blood of his heart, and then rushes burning through it like the shame of a personal insult.

Thus, orphaned and alone, stands that noble youth, his heart deep-pierced with the poignancy of bereavement, his body weakened with sorrow, when he receives the moral shock of the sudden ghastly disclosure of his mother's incestuous marriage.

Then it is that there is imposed upon him the terrible burden—to avenge a father's murder. He is confronted with the embodiment of evil in the supernatural appearance of the ghost, who subtly suggests to him the plausible retribution of a seemingly righteous revenge. And from this springs the orthodox theory of "irresolution"—a theory based on the erroneous assumption, that the theme of the play is a "command to kill and a delayed obedience."

But personal revenge has no place in Christian ethics ; neither has it in the heart of Hamlet. It is utterly abhorrent to his whole nature. He repudiates it with all his moral force. And his apparent cowardice and irresolution result not from weakness of volition, but from conscientiousness and virtue.

He knows that personal revenge has no sanction in the laws either of man or God ; hence, he possesses no such plan. The obligation of revenge is irresistibly thrust upon him by the ghost ; and, under the impulse of over-powering emotions, he involuntarily accepts the obligation. No sooner is the word "murder" upon his father's lips than he would sweep to his revenge

With wings as swift  
As meditation or the thoughts of love.

But what passes in his mind is scarcely a process of thought. His mental attitude is rather that of passive acquiescence than of voluntary and deliberate acceptance. It is only while his frame is still quivering from the shock of the ghastly disclosure of his father's "foul and most unnatural murder," and his mind is at his highest tension, that the avowal is forced from his lips, and he makes the daring resolve : Remember thee !

Yea, from the table of my memory  
I'll wipe away all trivial fond records,  
All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past,  
That youth and observation copied there ;  
And thy commandment all alone shall live  
Within the book and volume of my brain,  
Unmixed with baser matter : yes, by Heaven !  
O, most *pernicious woman* !

This solemn asseveration is but the sudden and instinctive utterance of a soul all ablaze with a righteous and burning anger, without any mediation of the reason or moral sense. His mind and feelings are too violently disturbed for any process of thought.

Conceive Hamlet vividly before you—see how every fibre of his frame quivers as by the "pale glimpses of the moon," he sees the yet paler face of the "once inurned dead." Listen to the harrowing details of that ghastly murder ; the solemn adjuration to revenge ; the kindly solicitude for a faithless wife ; the ghost's earnest entreaty to "remember me." These all, through the super-natural agency of the ghost, more than suffice to extort from his then too-acquiescent mind the consent to avenge a father's murder.

But the purpose conceived in the paroxysm of violent emotion quickly subsides with the subsidence of the emotion, because it lacks vitality.

His mind is prepossessed by an all-absorbing passion ;  
 And where the greater malady is fixed  
 The lesser is scarce felt.

Recovering from the severe tension of physical horror,  
 his first thoughts are directed to his mother's perfidy.

O, most pernicious *woman* ;  
 and no allusion is made to any purpose of revenge which  
 swiftly evaporates, and with it the energy of resolve.  
 And the next time that he does revert to it is  
 when there arises in his mind the suspicion that the  
 ghostly visitant he has seen may be, he says,

The devil : and the devil hath power  
 T'assume a pleasing shape ; yea, and perhaps  
 Out of my weakness and my melancholy,  
 (As he is very potent with such spirits),  
 Abuses me to damn me.

Yes, in his weakness and his melancholy—a condition  
 of mind super-induced by the terrible ordeal through  
 which he has passed—then it is the devil comes to him, and  
 working upon his over-strung nerves, “abuses him to  
 damn him.”

This overpowering temptation, re-inforced by the  
 visible and supernatural visitant from the other world,  
 is the spiritual crisis of Hamlet's life.

Such crises come into the lives of most men—a terrible  
 impulsion to evil, a spiritual agony, a “wrestling not  
 against flesh and blood,” but against the invisible and  
 concentrated forces of the powers of darkness. If  
 vanquished, the soul rises to a higher plane in the  
 realm of the spiritual ; if not, the trail of the serpent  
 for ever thereafter leaves its taint upon the heart and  
 life.

Hamlet was confronted with the terrible temptation  
 to avenge a father's murder. But because he vacillated,

and did not instantly repel the ghost's subtle incitement to revenge, argues not the moral weakness which is involved in the notion of "irresolution."

He would fain avenge a father's death ; but duty conflicts with affection. Affection instinctively impels him to a swift obedience of the ghost's command, while an exalted moral sense of duty sways his better judgment. Between these there interposes the vacillating will ; and because he vacillates and procrastinates, and does not yield to the temptation by translating the sworn resolve into action, the obloquy is cast upon him of being disqualified for action through excess of the reflective tendency.

For this reason he is severely condemned as being an idealist rather than a man of action ; as one who moralises upon when he should meet the stern realities of life ; one in whom, therefore, the thinking part prevails over the active. He is, therefore, stigmatised as weak and vacillating, as failing in his duty from impotence of will.

We repudiate the accusation. Hamlet is not wanting in power of volition, but in adequacy of motive, arising from want of moral conviction that his duty is to perpetrate an unnatural crime.

Had he had any such plan of revenge, it would have been constantly before his mind to the exclusion of all other interests ; but it is not. And even when it is, it is only from some suggestive incident from without which startles him into recollection of it, and not from any deliberate process of thought from within.

Again, the very essence of his musings, his broodings and conversation is opposed to the acceptance of any such theory of revenge which would make his speech

mere desultory and objectless talk, without point or pertinence to the action of the play.

To be an avenger of blood was to his sensitively moral soul abhorrent. To bear the brand of Cain would have been to do violence to his entire nature, and against which his whole soul rebelled.

Into the warp and woof of Hamlet's complex character was woven a profound and sublimated sense of moral duty.

Beneath the surface of his seeming acquiescence in the ghost's demands there was operative a deterrent moral power, which restrained him from staining his hands with blood, and, by obedience to whose behests, the pure and lofty soul of Hamlet rose triumphant over the malign influences which traitorously conspired to encompass his downfall. He was restrained from shedding blood from purely ethical considerations and conscientious motives.

Thus, the play of "Hamlet" delineates the character of a man in whom the visible workings of conscience may be seen powerfully dominating his life and conduct, repelling the subtle forces of evil arrayed against it to a successful issue.

The craven scruple

Of thinking too precisely on the event,  
this is the key to the elucidation of the text, and the solution of an otherwise insoluble mystery in the character and conduct of Hamlet.

There are few scenes in dramatic literature that can surpass the touching beauty of Hamlet's death !

As he had lived so he died with a conscious belief  
in that

Divinity that shapes our ends  
Rough-hew them how we will,

and bequeathing to the world the rich legacy of an unsullied reputation.

What an infinite depth of pathos in his dying wish, as, with the convulsive effort of expiring breath, he asks Horatio to transmit to the world the sad story of his life, and in that story an unwounded and an honoured name. The tender music of Hamlet's farewell to Horatio has found its echo in countless hearts :—

O good Horatio, what a wounded name,  
Things standing thus unknown shall live behind me !  
If thou did'st ever hold me in thy heart  
Absent thee from felicity awhile,  
And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain,  
To tell my story.

Exquisitely touching and beautiful, too, are Horatio's words uttered on the passing of the prince he loved so well :—

Now cracks a noble heart. Good night, sweet prince,  
And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest.  
There burst that noble heart. The rest is silence !

## II.—MACBETH.

### *Theme*—CRIMINAL AMBITION.

In "Macbeth" we have a study in temptation, in its inception, accomplishment and fruition : the curse of a criminal desire criminally fulfilled in the several stages of its glamour, its disillusionment, its agony of remorse and infidel despair.

Judged from a christian moralist's standpoint, the career of crime is never once controlled by any religious principle. It is the picture of two souls hurled along by a whirlwind of passion and resolve to the accomplish-

ment of a criminal desire. Soul and body are absorbed in the terrible feat. No moral restraints impede them, no fear of God arrests their guilty steps.

No, there is no God in the picture. They know not God in their day of pride ; they heeded Him not in the hour of sin ; they sought Him not in their agony of absorbing despair. And they die as they had lived, shorn of all hope and peace.

They had bartered life and soul for glory, and life and soul are lost, sacrificed upon the altar of a criminal ambition which reeked of blood. "By ambition fell the angels, and by ambition fell Macbeth and his wife, an ambition as false in its aim as it was fell in its effects : an ambition, in fine, which sought to trample upon ethical and political justice, and to proclaim the commencement of the era of the strongest."

The play is a transcript from the drama of human life, embodying with intense tragic power the deep spiritual truth, as reflected from the pages of Holy Writ—"the way of transgressors is hard."

"It sets before us," wrote Dean Farrar, "that the tempting opportunity always meets the susceptible disposition, and that when the evil thought has culminated in the evil purpose, and the evil purpose brought out the evil deed, the crime at once becomes its own pitiless avenger."

"The weird sisters," says Gervinus, "are simply the embodiment of inward temptation." "They are surely much more than this," Dr. Dowden remarks. "If we must regard the entire universe as a manifestation of an unknown somewhat which lies behind it, we are compelled to admit that there is an apocalypse of power



*Macbeth.*

Prithee, see there ! behold ! look ! lo ! how say you ?

Act III. Scene 4.

*From the picture by R. Westall, R.A.*

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auxiliary to vice, as really as there is a manifestation of virtuous energy.”\*

Whether the three witches are the embodiment of evil from within or without is quite irrelevant. In New Testament ethics, temptation is always assigned to the agency of evil spirits working on the souls of men. The heart of man is the battle-ground in the spiritual warfare. It is a bloodless conflict, “for we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world.” But, because bloodless, it is none the less real ; rather, the more real, subtle and poignant. And, for dramatic purposes, Shakespeare makes the witches haggard and skinny and pitiless, the incarnation of that evil which is the one terrible fact in the world.

To win us to our harm,  
The instruments of darkness tell us truths ;  
Win us with honest trifles, to betray’s  
In deepest consequence.

These sisters transport us from everyday life to the realm of the unreal where we are sensible of moving under the pall of a fiendish witchcraft.

Shakespeare has poetically materialized them as consistent with the tradition of an age and country in which everything received a tinge of superstition, and everybody was tainted with a superstitious belief.

Observe, that it is in the “hour of success,” in the white heat of the intoxication of victory that Macbeth’s mind is fascinated with the images of false hopes. When most accessible to the temptation, then it is that he is confronted by the hags—the emissaries of Satan, who

\* “Shakespeare : His Mind and Art.”

hail him as "Thane of Cawdor," and "King that shalt be."

They represent to him as the work of fate what can be achieved only by his own deed. Yet, withal, his destiny is in his own hands. He is a free conscious agent in the exercise of his own will. They possess no fatalistic power to lay prostrate that will. They are weird sisters only in the sense in which men carry their own fates in their own bosoms. And Macbeth, in confronting them, has to struggle against no external power, but only with the temptation within on the battleground of his own heart. There, in the soul, must the battle be waged if a moral victory is to be won. "But Macbeth fails because he interprets with his worldly mind things spiritually suggested to him. God sends on men "strong delusion that they should believe a lie."\*

"The true reason for the first appearance of the Witches," said Coleridge, "is to strike the key-note of the whole drama."

It is not without significance that the last words of the Witches in the opening scene of the play,

Fair is foul and foul is fair

Hover through the fog and filthy air,

are the first words which Macbeth himself utters although he has not heard the refrain :—

So foul and fair a day I have not seen.

It is as if these words were ringing in his ears—a foreshadowing of the mysterious and terrible compact between his own soul and the awful external powers of evil, and which was thereafter to be ratified by deeds of bloodshed.

\* Masfield : "William Shakespeare."

"Shakespeare intimates by this that although Macbeth has not set eyes upon these hags, the connection is already established between his soul and them. Their spells have already wrought upon his blood."

Rapt in wonder, with bated breath and feverish brow, he listens to the Sisters' fiendishly seductive whisper. "Would they had stayed!" exclaimed he, when they had vanished. Thus he dallies with the Tempter. He scorns to exorcise from his mind the spirit of evil which is bartering for his soul in exchange for a crown.

In the soliloquy

This supernatural soliciting  
Cannot be ill ; cannot be good : if ill,  
Why hath it given me earnest of success,  
Commencing in a truth ?

there are laid bare to us his most secret hidden thoughts. There is made visible to our gaze the subtle working of the virus of evil which is insinuated into his soul, and which is thereafter to poison the springs of his inmost being, and to convert day and night into a "restless ecstasy." His words,

Why do I yield to that suggestion  
Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair,  
And make my seated heart knock at my ribs  
Against the use of nature ?

imply acquiescence in the temptation, the consent of the will—the early birthday of his guilt. And by this conscious act of volition the seed of sin has taken root in his soul, thereafter to germinate and to bear the fruit of murder.

In the mind of Banquo, whom Shakespeare places in sharp contrast against the character of Macbeth, as

virtue is set over against disloyalty, no less than in the mind of Macbeth are the " cursed thoughts " of ambition. But Banquo prays for restraint from the promptings of evil :—

Merciful powers

Restrain in me the cursed thoughts that nature  
Gives way to in repose.

Not so Macbeth, who yields to the seductive whisperings of evil by brooding over, instead of banishing from his mind, the criminal thought

Whose murder yet is but fantastical.

The spiritual crisis in his career of crime is reached when he confronts his wife.

Dauntless and valiant as a soldier in war Macbeth, left to himself, might have proved no less valiant in spiritual combat with the powers of evil.

But the array of malign forces marshalled against him to encompass his moral ruin were too formidable for him ; not too formidable *per se*, but for Macbeth. For there is no temptation so great, though all the powers of hell conspire against us, that can transcend the limits of human conquest.

Potentially, man is stronger than Satan in the realm of the spiritual, and if in combat he suffer defeat the secret of failure lies not in the force of the temptation, but in culpable impotence of will in not utilizing the reserve of moral force which is latent in the soul of every man.

Thus was it with Macbeth. His was the power of victory over base desire, or, alas ! the misery of weak compliance. He voluntarily chose the latter.

Without attempting to palliate, far less to condone his crime, it needed superhuman strength to render him invincible against the combined forces of evil which wrought his ruin.

Within his mind is the vague yet mastering inspiration of crime received from the Witches. On his first interview with his wife the latent passion for empire is kindled into a quenchless flame which ultimately consumes his whole being. She meets him with a fiendish rapture not in the least degree shared by Macbeth. To use her own words,

Thy letters have transported me beyond  
This ignorant present, and I feel now  
The future in the instant.

He momentarily dismisses the thought of what the words import, by reminding her of the claims of hospitality which should absorb their present attention :

My dearest love,  
Duncan comes here to-night—

“And when goes hence ? ” she asks with sinister intent.  
“To-morrow—as he purposes,” he frankly replies.

Then it is that Lady Macbeth openly reveals to him her murderous purpose. How pregnant her reply :—

O, never  
Shall sun that morrow see.

And, scanning his face, she reads as in a book the turmoil of his contending thoughts :—

Your face, my Thane, is as a book, where men  
May read strange matters.

And with a fiendish eloquence she bids him banish such looks by hypocritical dissimulation :—

To beguile the time  
Look like the time ; bear welcome in your eye,  
Your hand, your tongue : look like the innocent flower,  
But be the serpent under 't.

The idea of murder is to him revolting. He is stunned at the thought, and strives to free himself from his internal conflict by procrastination :—

We will speak further.

And as the time approached for decision he again shrinks from it, and would fain drop the whole matter :—

We will proceed no further in this business.

His nature, which is too full of the milk of human kindness, instinctively recoils from the perpetration of the deed of horror, but she, like an evil genius, whispers him on to his damnation.

His hour had come to fall or rise. The final contest was at hand. The antagonistic forces of good and evil in his soul, which had so long torn his mind with varying success, were now locked in a final struggle. The spiritual climax is reached. With relentless force Lady Macbeth lashes his flagging and reluctant spirit, goading him on to the deed of assassination, until, swept before the torrent of her fierce and fervid eloquence, her stinging reproach, her biting sarcasm, and her imputation of cowardice, he is borne irresistibly to his doom.

From his wife's terrible impulse into crime he never recovers. Henceforth, he surrenders himself, body and soul, to the powers of darkness.

I am settled, and bend up

Each corporal agent to this terrible feat.

This is the first step in the damnation of his soul.

To what writer has it been given to add more awful emphasis to the rule,

Guard well thy thoughts for thoughts are

Heard in Heaven ?

No concrete warning could more powerfully enforce the lesson, " Resist the beginnings of evil."

Macbeth dallied with the Tempter, and was lost. His only safety lay in stern and instant repudiation of the execrable temptation. Had he but strangled it at its birth he had conquered. Had he but trampled the evil thought out of his soul at its very inception he had

achieved a moral victory. Not so, Macbeth. He listens to the juggling prophecy of the witches till the thought becomes the wish, and the wish the murderous purpose, and the murderous purpose the criminal act.

Thus, Macbeth takes the fatal first step in the downward path to perdition by allowing the temptation a lodgement in his soul. From this criminal thought was evolved the terrible tragedy that transpired.

The play is, moreover, a powerful vindication of the existence and power of conscience. It is the tragedy of sin its own avenger.

However the guilty ones may "bend up each corporal agent to the terrible feat," yet the outraged moral forces within prove too mighty for them, and rise in overwhelming fury against them, and we lose all other regards in the appalling soul-convulsions through which their sense of guilt breaks into utterance.

In the theme of "Macbeth" is vividly portrayed the moral turpitude, the abyssmal depths of sin into which men inevitably sink, who burst the fetters which the morality of Christ has forged for them, when such ethical restraints are withdrawn as are contained in the Decalogue.

### III.—OTHELLO.

*Theme*—SLANDER.

In "Othello" is realized the tragedy of life. It is an impressive study of supreme wickedness incarnated in the mind of a man whose intellectual hypocrisy and villainy lead to tragic ruin. It is a tragic commentary upon the pregnant words of St. James, "the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity; it is set on fire of Hell," vividly illustrating the Satanic power of slander.

"It is a divine hieroglyph of the demoniac power of the earth—of the entire earthly nature."

In Iago, Shakespeare has given us the most perfect picture of an unmitigated villain—a specimen of those "men slugs and human serpentry," of whom Keats speaks, blasting with the breath of their viperous calumny pure and innocent lives. He is an incarnated devil who disbelieves wholly in goodness whether in himself or others. This is his canon of conduct, and on this he acts.

He is intellectually sensual, the soul itself having become more animal than the body can ever be.

He is without a single spark of true nobility of soul. In him the angel is sunk in the animal: earth has no damnation deeper than that! He is of the earth earthy. "He feeds on dust, and by the alchemy of his own baseness transmutes it into venom." He emits poison at every step he takes, and leaves behind him the trail of the serpent. All who cross his path fall victims to the poison of his viperous tongue.

This "demi-devil," like the Arch-Fiend, whose offspring he is, revels in victimising the innocent by his damning accusations. He chuckles with fiendish delight over the anguish and suffering of those whom he sees taken in his toils and writhing to death.

"This passionless character," says Coleridge, "is all will and intellect. And," he pregnantly remarks, "the motive-hunting of a motiveless malignity, in Iago's Soliloquy, A.I., S. III.—how awful it is! Yea, whilst he is still allowed to bear the Divine Image, it is too fiendish for his own steady view, for the lonely gaze of a being next to devil, and only not quite devil."\*

He is typical of those we meet with in life who know

\* "Lectures on Shakespeare."



*Othello.*

I'll not shed her blood,  
Nor scar that whiter skin of her's than snow,  
And smooth as monumental alabaster.  
Yet she must die, else she'll betray more men.

*From the picture by Frank Dicksee. \**

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human nature, but see it only on its evil side. "Malignity and animalism suffice this human Mephistopheles."

"There is no character in Shakespeare's plays," says Dowden, "so full of serpentine power and serpentine poison."

In the Sacred Record we read, with far-reaching significance, that "the serpent was more subtle than any beast of the field which the Lord God had made." And it is with this same serpentine subtlety and demoniac power that Iago attacks the most vulnerable part of Othello's ethic armour, by suggesting the hypothetical frailty of Desdemona. From this fiendishly subtle suggestion spring the tragic issues of the drama.

With consummate hypocrisy and cunning Iago insinuates the poison of his base calumnies of Desdemona into the mind of Othello :—

O beware, my lord, of jealousy ;  
It is the green-eyed monster which doth mock  
The meat it feeds on.

But Othello is a man of too true nobility of soul to be "easily jealous," a trait of character so beautifully confirmed by Desdemona herself :—

*Des. :* " My noble Moor  
Is true of mind, and made of no such baseness  
As jealous creatures are."

*Emil. :* " Is he not jealous ? "

*Des. :* " Who, he ? I think the sun where he was born  
Drew all such humours from him."

Iago is severely introversive. And out of the vileness of his own mind is conceived the idea of falsely aspersing the character of Desdemona, by imputing to her a nameless deed of shame, and thus attacking Othello at his most vulnerable point—the unassailable purity and

goodness of his wife. He cannot survive the loss of faith in that. The agonizing conviction that she is false, once instilled, shatters him.

"For fiendish subtlety," as has been truly said, "the suggestion might well emanate from the 'Father of Lies' himself."

To Iago, the purest of all sentiments is a mere

Lust of the blood, and a permission of the will.

Steeped in the pollution of his own heart, love is transformed into lust, reeking with the filth of his own evil nature. He lives in a world devoid alike of all virtue and of all beauty : to him they are non-existent. Virtue is

A fig ! 'tis in ourselves that we are thus or thus.

He inverts the moral order of things ; to him evil is good, and good evil.

Desdemona's innocent importunities on behalf of Cassio are, by the perfidy of Iago, instilled into the mind of Othello like an irritant poison, which, rankling there, converts his love into measureless hate and revenge.

In the guileless innocence of her heart she pleads for Cassio as for a friend, and with a winning wifely confidence in the love of Othello :—

What ! Michael Cassio,

That came a-wooing with you, and so many a time

When I have spoke of you disparagingly

Hath ta'en your part ? Why this is not a boon ;

'Tis as I should entreat you wear your gloves,

Or feed on nourishing meats, or keep you warm,

Or sue you to do a peculiar profit

To your person. Nay, when I have a suit

Wherein I mean to touch your love indeed,

I shall be full of poise, and fearful to be granted.

Othello's trusting confidence at first staggered by the base insinuations and broken hints of Iago, recovers

itself at the sight of Desdemona ; and there bursts forth from the depths of his soul the passionate utterance,

If she be false O, then Heaven mocks itself  
I'll not believe it.

But the poison is still there, and so deep insinuated into his blood as to convert day and night into one long and ceaseless agony until, as the arch-traitor exultingly exclaims,

Not poppy nor mandragora,  
Nor all the drowsy syrups of the world,  
Shall ever medicine thee to that sweet sleep  
Which thou owed'st yesterday.

With diabolical cunning and artifice, Iago gradually enfolds him within the coils of his serpentine intrigue. He first raises in Othello's mind vague suspicions ; then he openly impugns his wife's fidelity, aspersing her with baseless infamy, by presenting to Othello's mind the most revolting images. But so consciously innocent is Desdemona of any such deed of shame that, when the foul accusation is flung on her in vilest terms, she cannot bring her lips even to utter the abhorrent word. Such is the "angelic delicacy and crystal purity of her thoughts" :

*Des.* : " Am I that name Iago ? "

*Iago* : " What name, fair lady ? "

*Des.* : " Such as she says my lord did say I was."

" So completely did Shakespeare," as Mrs. Jameson remarks, " enter into the angelic refinement of the character." Her purity was the Palladium of her strength.

Othello, shattered by the weight of apparently cumulative evidence of her guilt, all his soul's passion exhales, and the demon of revenge takes possession of him. In a trembling agony of doubt and fear he abandons all his love and hopes in a breath.

Look here, Iago ;

All my fond love thus do I blow to Heaven.

'Tis gone !

Arise, black vengeance, from thy hollow cell !

Yield up, O love, thy crown and hearted throne,

To tyrannous hate ! Swell, bosom, with thy fraught ;

For 'tis of aspics tongues.

The poison of infernal villainy has done its work.

One of the most poignantly pathetic scenes of the play is the swooning of Othello. Affecting, beyond words, is the sight of the prostrate figure of the stalwart soldier and brave warrior stricken to the ground, as with a mortal wound, under the malign influence of Iago's treachery. The envenomed shaft of the hellish slander has pierced his heart.

But Shakespeare does not allow Iago to triumph. Iago cannot escape the Nemesis of retributive punishment. The "even-handed justice" of an invisible judge, which we call "life's justicer," at length lays bare his villainy at the instant of its perfection.

Iago, with all his astuteness, did not foresee that his wife might betray him, though she have nothing to gain by his betrayal, simply from affection and horror.

I care not for thy sword ; I'll make thee known,

Though I lost twenty lives—Help ! help, ho ! help !

The Moor hath kill'd my mistress.

In vain Iago tries to stop her mouth ; by her own words he is betrayed, and with her own blood she seals her testimony against him.

Enraged at her betrayal of him, he stabs Emilia, though the blow seals his own ruin. And how complete is the Nemesis upon Iago !

"The Nemesis," says Professor Moulton, "draws items of equal retribution from all the intrigues of Iago. It was on account of Emilia that he played the

villain, and it is Emilia who betrays him. He had made a tool of Roderigo, and the contents of the dead Roderigo's pockets furnish the final links of evidence against him. His main purpose was to oust Cassio both from office and life : Cassio lives to succeed Othello as Governor, and make his first official act his superintendence of Iago's torturing."

For Iago, in our loathing, we have no heart of pity when he is tortured and executed ; but for his innocent victims we have nothing but tears of compassion.

Thus, as always in Shakespeare's plays, the inherent majesty of goodness prevails even amid the temporary triumphs of wickedness.

The dramatic consummation is not the impunity of the schemingly prosperous man, but the punishment of the sinner. Nemesis is satisfied over Iago, caught helplessly in toils of his own over-astute blundering.

Though God may for a while seem dethroned from the moral government of the world, the inexorable law of justice will sooner or later unfailingly assert its prerogative, by punishing the evil-doer, and thus "justify the ways of God to man." No power can cajole it, or make iniquity permanently prosper even amid apparently irretrievable defeats.

Thus is vindicated the Immortality of Goodness ; that  
 God's in His Heaven,  
 All's right with the world.

To this—the supremacy of moral goodness, and its certain ultimate victory—our own sentiments bear witness by the very nature of the emotions provoked as we follow the progress of the play to its dénouement.

On purely ethical grounds, Othello's suicide cannot, of course, be condoned ; but, judged from the dramatic necessities of the play, it is a just retribution which

Fate demands of him for the guiltless death of Desdemona.

Impelled, not by jealousy, to take her life, he offers her as a victim to his stern sense of honour, and, then, recognizing his own calamitous error, and her absolute purity and loyalty, the only expiation possible to him is to sacrifice his own life as an atonement for hers. This he does, and dies by his own hand.

Othello's last two acts were perhaps the most heroic of his life.

There is nothing in all Literature, Ancient or Modern, which can surpass the tragic intensity of the closing scene in the death-chamber.

We stand aghast, dumb with horror, at the appalling sight—a sight so heart-rending in its unutterable pathos, that we seem almost to hear the tears of angels falling at the spectacle of the murder and its innocent victim—a victim consecrated from the first—"an offering without blemish," alone worthy of the grand final sacrifice.

Poignant beyond words is the anguish of Othello's mind as, dissolved in bitterest tears of penitence and remorse, there is wrung from his agonized soul the heart-breaking confession,

Of one that loved not wisely but too well ;  
 Of one not easily jealous, but being wrought  
 Perplex'd in the extreme ; of one whose hand,  
 Like the base Indian, threw a pearl away  
 Richer than all his tribe ; of one whose subdued eyes,  
 Albeit unused to the melting mood,  
 Drops tears as fast as the Arabian trees  
 Their medicinal gum.

Ah, vain now his agony of love and remorse ; vain now his self-reproach and his scalding tears ! Too late, alas ! When death has claimed its innocent victim does he recognize Desdemona's wifely fidelity to him and

love, and with his dying lips on hers he attests to Heaven his penitence and the unsullied purity of the victim offered :—

I kissed thee ere I kill'd thee ; no way, but this  
Killing myself, to die upon a kiss.

“ Desdemona and Othello,” says Walter Raleigh, “ are both made perfect in the act of death ; so that the idea of murder is lost and forgotten in the sense of sacrifice.”

Thus, in death they were not divided.

#### IV.—MEASURE FOR MEASURE.

##### *Theme*—SENSUALITY.

Where in all literature, outside the Bible, can the lesson of chastity be found so powerfully enforced as from the lips of the sainted Isabella with her white passion of purity and indignation against sin ? It is a lesson written in flaming letters of gold across the dark pages of this sombre play.

And the ethical value of its teaching is enhanced by the fact, that Shakespeare has purged the story of the moral poison which pollutes the sources whence he borrowed the plot, which was a sordid record of lust and cruelty. There, the heroines yield their chastity for their brothers' sakes ; whereas, Shakespeare preserves the honour of the heroine, Isabella, and introduces the character of Mariana “ to take her wifely place by Angelo, as a substitute for Isabella.”

She is presented to us by Shakespeare as a thing “ ensky'd and sainted,” “ God's handmaiden who could not be unclean,” who is severe and beautiful, and white with an absolute whiteness, and who would rather forfeit a brother's life than sacrifice her own honour upon the licentious altar of unchastity :

Better it were a brother died at once,  
 Than that a sister, by redeeming him,  
 Should die for ever.

How poignantly pathetic is the Prison Scene between brother and sister, when the erring Claudio pleads with all the passionate vehemence of youth for his life, and Isabella defends her chastity with all the virginal strength and purity of her soul ! It is no less inexpressibly grand alike in its sentiment and its poetry !

It is a powerful study in psychology, a thrilling illustration of the debasing and demoralizing effects of sensual sin on the mind and heart of youth.

Isabella's painful mission is to prepare her brother for immediate death. Claudio has heroically resolved to die bravely. But when he asks, " Is there no remedy?" she unflinchingly admits that there *is*, but such a remedy " as to save a head would cleave a heart in twain." He could indeed free himself, but only at the terrible cost of fettering himself to shame for life. Then, she shudders at the thought lest his fond clinging to life should burst through all moral barriers, and urge her to stoop to sin ; and to reconcile him to his fate, she would rob death of its terrors, by reminding him that

The sense of death is most in apprehension.

At this there leaps forth a sudden flame of indignation :

Why give you me this shame ?

Think you I can a resolution fetch

From flowery tenderness. If I must die,

I will encounter darkness as a bride

And hug it in my arms !

" There spake my brother," exclaims Isabella, elate of heart at the boldness of his asseveration,

There my father's grave did utter forth a voice.

Then, she frankly tells him of the alternative offered by Angelo :

If I would yield him my virginity  
Thou mightest be freed.

At the first impulse of feeling, he scornfully rejects the price at which Isabella may purchase his life by selling her soul.

And here is disclosed to us the rottenness of his heart, the inward moral corruption and utter degradation of the entire man which would drag his sister down to the very gates of Hell. He first minimises the enormity of the sin, then, tries to intimidate her by the awfulness of death, to which she replies, that a shamed life is even more hateful.

Then, setting his imagination to work on the certain doom that awaits him, he revels in the soul-harrowing descriptions of the chill horribleness of the grave and what lies beyond it :

Ay, but to die, and go we know not where ;  
To lie in cold obstruction and to rot ;  
This sensible warm motion to become  
A kneaded clod ; and the delighted spirit  
To bathe in fiery floods, or to reside  
In thrilling region of thick-ribbed ice ;  
To be imprison'd in the viewless winds,  
And blown with restless violence round about  
The pendent world : or to be worse than worst  
Of those that lawless and incertain thought  
Imagine howling ! 'tis too horrible !  
The weariest and most loathed worldly life  
That age, ache, penury and imprisonment  
Can lay on nature is a Paradise  
To what we fear of death.

Momentarily, he evokes her pity, and there escapes from her lips the piteous " Alas, alas ! " when she sees his youthful spirit shrinking back from the immediate prospect of the grave. Finally, he implores his sister to let him live, and working upon her pity, he basely

argues that vice becomes a virtue when committed to save a brother's life.

Sweet sister, let me live :

What sin you do to save a brother's life,  
Nature dispenses with the deed so far  
That it becomes a virtue.

Then her womanly pity is turned into burning righteous anger, and her whole moral nature is all aflame in revolt against him. And when he "faintly invites her to yield herself to shame for his sake, she severs herself with indignation, not from her brother, not from Claudio, but from this disgrace of manhood in her brother's form."

What can surpass the fierce invective of stern denunciation with which she scornfully repudiates her brother's vile suggestion to commit a nameless deed of shame for his sake? Judging her brother by her own spirit and her exalted ethical standard of purity, she had approached him with not a shadow of misgiving as to his fortitude and magnanimity :—

I'll to my brother

Though he hath fallen by prompture of the blood,  
Yet hath he in him such a mind of honour,  
That had he twenty heads to tender down  
On twenty bloody blocks, he'd yield them up,  
Before his sister should her body stoop  
To such abhorred pollution !

But when her trust in his honour is shattered by his momentary moral weakness, her scorn has a bitterness and her indignation a force of expression almost fearful.

Her whole soul is afire with the white heat of a burning indignation. From the loathsomeness of the sin her virginal purity recoils with a sickening sense of moral disgust. Better were it that he die than that she commit "this treason against fidelity of the heart."

All the pent-up shame and agony of the holy maiden bursts forth. "O you beast," she cries,

O faithless coward ! O dishonest wretch !  
 Wilt thou be made a man out of my vice ?  
 Is't not a kind of incest to take life  
 From thine own sister's shame ?  
 . . . . . Take my defiance :  
 Die ! Perish ! Might but my bending down  
 Reprieve thee from thy fate, it should proceed.  
 I'll pray a thousand prayers for thy death,  
 No word to save thee.

Thus, passing through the crucible of Shakespeare's purer mind, the play is raised to a higher moral plane of thought and action. And nowhere is the refining operation of his genius more evident than in the purification of his stories.

Never, too, were more poignantly portrayed the demoralizing and disintegrating effects of sensuality upon the mind of a youth in whom, but for this evil bias, there was a capacity for nobler things.

The sin, once admitted, eats like a canker into his soul, and we see the gradual rotting away and sapping of his whole moral and spiritual nature by unlawful indulgence ; the gradual eating up of all the better qualities in the nature that yields to such a life.

"*Quem uno peccato contentum vidisti ?*" asks St. Augustine. No, sins are never single. Sin begets sin ; often, too, with amazing fecundity.

The play thrillingly illustrates **how** the sin of sensual indulgence blunts the finer feelings of the soul, and obliterates from the heart all love for moral goodness.

And, "in the mind thus vitiated, the first natural instinct of nobler disdain for what is infamous is rapidly perverted by the soft pleadings of a sensual egotism," until the man becomes the victim of basest impulses—a

moral derelict, bereft of all power of noble endeavour.

"The moral drawn from which is that the safeguards of mere virtue are naught when the flood-gates of passion are opened. Only the restraints of religion can then avail.

"The atmosphere of the piece is gloomy, while its horizon-line is piled deep with the thunder-clouds of retribution shot through ever and anon with the lightnings of ethical expiation."\*

#### V.—ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA.

Theme—ILLICIT LOVE.

No more fascinating figures are visible across the centuries than those of Antony and Cleopatra.

"The characters of Antony and Cleopatra," writes Dowden, "insinuate themselves through the senses, trouble the blood, ensnare the imagination, invade our whole being like colour or like music. The figures dilate to proportions greater than human, and are seen through a golden haze of sensuous splendour."† In them are depicted the corruption and wreck of a noble soul by a voluptuous and abandoned woman.

The play illustrates, with the incomparable power of Shakespeare's genius, the ruin of a great man encompassed by the subtle spell of a woman's wiles and smiles.

It is the old, old story of war and romance, of love and tragedy, wherein the magnetism of sex becomes the source of the tragedy.

The plot is the record of the *liaison* between Cleopatra, the beautiful Queen of Egypt, and Marcus Antonius, the Roman, and the consequent ruin of the latter by the former. Cleopatra is the most wonderful of all Shakes-

\* Smeaton : "Shakespeare : His Life and Work."

† Dowden : "Shakespeare : His Mind and Art."

peare's female creations, in whom is united all that is complex and bewitching in the female character—an undecipherable enigma—yet, withal, a woman under the fascinating influence of whose magic spell Antony sacrifices the dominion of the world.

Shakespeare has painted the seductive power of this Egyptian Circe, as well as her capacity for enjoyment in the immortal lines :—

Age cannot wither her nor custom stale  
Her infinite variety ; other women cloy  
The appetites they feed ; but she makes hungry  
Where most she satisfies ; for vilest things  
Become themselves in her.

“Cleopatra,” says Hugo, “is the supreme type of seduction. The spell which she weaves is the greatest triumph of feminine magic.”

By the intoxication of sex which exhales from her the nobility of Antony's manhood is sapped at the very fount of its power ; and he is swept along by the whirlwind of an illicit and unbridled passion to the doom which inexorable fate assigns him as a debased debauchee.

We see the prostitution of manhood's glory by the love of sexual passion which is unrestrained by any ethical principles.

The luminously outstanding moral truth emblazoned in letters of gold upon the pages of this play is that “the wages of sin is death.”

*Macbeth* is the tragedy of a man obsessed by the lust of power which wrought his ruin ; Antony, by the lust of pleasure, or the pleasure of lust, which saps his true manhood, and leaves him a moral derelict upon the ocean of voluptuous self-indulgence.

By the magnetism of her person Cleopatra takes captive his entire being. Body and soul are alike

prostrated before the fascinating influence and gipsy sorcery of this powerful enchantress—the “serpent of old Nile,” who was a past mistress in sin before she had passed the Rubicon of the teens. To her seductive spell he surrenders all the glory of noble manhood. He gradually loses his energy, his judgment and his joy in life until, at last, there settles down upon him the despair of spent forces.

Herein lies the root of the Tragedy.

Antony, once great in war, great in statesmanship, whose noble elegiac over the bloody body of Cæsar marked him as one favoured of the gods ; Antony, at whose feet lay the dominion of the world, staked his all upon a woman, and lost. All is lost ! His kingdom, his manhood, his life, all are sacrificed for the love of a voluptuous woman—a royal courtesan whose subtle and sensuous beauty wrought his moral ruin.

Cleopatra is the ideal of sensual attractiveness—the Queen of beauty, more beautiful, as Enobarbus maintains, than that pictured Venus, in which imaginative genius had surpassed the work of Nature :—

For her own person  
It beggared all description. . .  
Over-picturing that Venus, where we see  
The fancy outwork Nature.

Little wonder, then, that Antony should have fallen a victim under the spell of her transcendent and bewitching beauty.

Her “infinite variety” dazzles his intellect, captivates his imagination, and lulls his moral sense to sleep like a narcotic.

The tragedy of life contains three progressive stages : the fascination of pleasure ; satiety and disillusionment ; and, finally, death.

Sin is always attractive. Like the painted harlot, vice is clothed in the seductive garb of beauty. "The pleasure of sin begins with laughter ; it ends with the groans of death." It opens with an overture ; it closes with a Marche Funèbre.

These several stages are vividly portrayed in the life-tragedy of Antony from the time he first fell under the magic spell of Cleopatra.

She is the gorgeous Eastern queen, a demi-goddess, resplendent in all the opulent and sensuous beauty of Oriental luxury and pomp. What can surpass in vivid richness of colouring and Oriental exuberance of fancy the following poetic picture of her :—

The barge she sat in, like a burnish'd throne,  
 Burn'd on the water ; the poop was beaten gold ;  
 Purple the sails, and so perfumèd that  
 The winds were love-sick with them ; the oars were silver  
 Which to the tune of flutes kept stroke, and made  
 The water, which they beat, to follow faster,  
 As amorous of their strokes. For her own person,  
 It beggar'd all description : she did lie  
 In her pavilion—cloth-of-gold of tissue—  
 O'er-picturing that Venus, where we see  
 The fancy out-work nature : on each side her  
 Stood pretty-dimpled boys, like smiling Cupids,  
 With divers-coloured fans, whose wind did seem  
 To glow the delicate cheeks which they did cool,  
 And what they undid, did.

Seen through a golden-haze of dazzling splendour, the bewitching beauty of her person "seems," as Hazlitt remarks, "almost to justify the subsequent infatuation of Antony when, in the sea-fight at Actium, he leaves the battle, and 'like a doting mallard,' follows her flying sails."

The facile Antony is fully conscious of her absolute dominion over him by which he is held enthralled, as when he confesses :

O'er my spirit

Thy full supremacy thou knew'st, and that  
 Thy beck might from the bidding of the gods  
 Command me.           \*           \*           \*           \*  
 O, this false soul of Egypt! This grave charm,  
 Whose eye beck'd forth my wars, and call'd them home;  
 Whose bosom was my crownnet, my chief end,—  
 Like a right gypsy hath, at fast and loose,  
 Beguil'd me to the very heart of loss.

Antony, in whom are the elements of noble manhood, is intoxicated by the sexual attractiveness of Cleopatra, under whose magic spell life becomes to him one long luxury of dissipation. Drunken with the intoxication of her sex he feels himself impotent to resist the incomprehensible and bewitching power of her person. And, nowhere is this more marked than when he goes to Rome, and is wedded to Octavia.

Though in Rome his heart is in Egypt held captive by Cleopatra :—

I will to Egypt :

And though I make this marriage for my peace  
 I' the East my pleasure lies.

And his return to Egypt is a triple act of treachery to himself, to his wife, and to his country.

“Antony's passion for Cleopatra,” says Mrs. Jameson, “is a species of infatuation, a single and engrossing feeling : it is, in short, the love of a man declined in years, for a woman very much younger than himself, and who has subjected him by every species of female enchantment.”

It is an infatuation, a delirium, which slays his nobler nature, and with it that stern Roman sense of virtue and of duty which once was his ; and, because a criminal passion, having no root in the deeper depths of his being, he is haunted by the suspicion that Cleopatra will



*Cleo.*

Your honour calls you hence ;  
Therefore be deaf to my unpitied folly,  
And all the gods go with you.

Act I. Scene 4.

TO WHOM  
ADDRESS

betray him, and even debase herself by criminal familiarity with Cæsar's menials.

That it was an infatuation, pure and simple, is evident from the fact that even when she had played him false, he clung to her.

Cleopatra's capriciousness and mutability do not exclude in her the most real and passionate love for Antony. Its strength is attested by the way in which she speaks of him when he is absent.

O Charmian !

Where think'st thou he is now ? Stands he, or sits he ?

Or does he walk ? Or is he on his horse ?

O, happy horse, to bear the weight of Antony !

Do bravely, horse ! for wot'st thou whom thou movest ?

The demi-Atlas of this earth, the arm

And burgonet of men !

And, again, when with passionate longing for his return, she would annihilate time :—

*Cleo.* : " Give me to drink Mandragora."

*Char.* : " Why, Madam ? "

*Cleo.* : " That I might sleep out the great gap of time my Antony is away."

Yet, passionate though her love be for Antony, it is not the pure consecrated affection which makes of human union an earthly sacrament, meet to be offered to God by two of his creatures united by the indissoluble ties of holy wedlock, but the wanton love of a courtesan, a sensuous erotic emotion which from its very nature drags them down to their mutual destruction.

Such is the penalty of their illicit union—the penalty of violated moral law.

Yet, even Cleopatra cannot satisfy his delirium of love. It burns like a raging fever in his blood. He is drunken to distraction with a woman like a raging thirst, and the more he seeks to allay its cravings the more infinite it becomes. He has fed to the full of sensual pleasure,

but it has brought him no satisfaction—only satiety, disillusionment and despair.

In the vague, vast realm of sensual delight, wherein he recognized no moral bounds, he has learned the illusive-ness of life ; and amid the glare and glitter and glamour of it all he is not happy. He has sacrificed his happiness upon the altar of voluptuous self-indulgence, which has dominated his whole being to the degradation and disintegration of his true manhood, followed by the remorseless Nemesis of eternal law. And " he dies with curses upon his lips. The remaining conscience denounces the cause of his ruin. Lost, lost, all is lost, his kingdom, his past, his future, his manhood, his life, all are gone. At last, his self-respect rises up and stabs the body."

This is the Herculean Roman whom once all men had loved and revered, dying in self-inflicted pain and dishonour—a tragic commentary upon the words, " the wages of sin is death "—words which are vitalized with a new and poignant meaning when read in the light of these two lives.

Cleopatra, too, pays the penalty of violated moral law. While moved to pity for fallen greatness, we do not condone the guilt and error of her past life which is almost redeemed by the grandeur of her death.

As she had lived, so she died—a Queen arrayed in all the regal splendour of queenly pomp and circumstance.

Yet, though the Tragedy has all the glow and glamour of Oriental splendour, it yet remains true at heart to the moral laws which govern human life.

But the play has a deeper moral significance in the mind of Shakespeare than as touching the characters involved. With a prophet's vision he saw that the same destructive elements of evil work moral ruin whether as applied to individuals or nations.

“ Just as Antony’s ruin,” says Dr. George Brandes, “ results from his connection with Cleopatra, so does the fall of the Roman Republic result from the contact of the simple hardihood of the West with the luxury of the East. Antony is Rome ; Cleopatra is the Orient. When he perishes, a prey to the voluptuousness of the East, it is as though Roman greatness and the Roman Republic expired with him.”

Nowhere in the whole range of tragic literature is there to be found a scene of greater beauty than that which witnesses her death. “ Cleopatra is the only Shakespearean woman,” says Masefield, “ who dies heroically upon the stage—her death-scene is not the greatest, nor the most terrible, but it is the most beautiful scene in all the Tragedies. The words,

Finish good lady ; the bright day is done,

And we are for the dark,

and those most marvellous words uttered, written at one golden time in a gush of the spirit, when the man must have been trembling—

O, Eastern star !

Peace, peace !

Dost thou not see my baby at my breast,

That sucks the nurse asleep ?

are among the most beautiful things ever written by man.”\*

Antony is the incarnation of Rome ; Cleopatra of Egypt. They are but types of a class. Human nature has not changed with the passing of the Centuries. The world, to-day, is full of Antonys ; it is full of Cleopatras. They comprise the great social question which is filling our Divorce Courts, and agitating the minds of present-

\* Masefield : “ Shakespeare ”

day reformers and legislators. "They are the wreckers of the social order. Every city has its Antony who, while swearing allegiance to some spotless Fulvia, dissipates his life with some Cleopatra ; who, professing love to some Cleopatra, marries some Octavia."

The play is a tragedy of life, poignant and real which is being re-enacted in and wrecking with its withering blight, many a home to-day—the inevitable penalty men and women have to pay for the criminal indulgence of illicit love.

## VI.—THE MERCHANT OF VENICE.

*Theme*—RELIGIOUS BIGOTRY.

The popular conception of the play, as exhibited on the stage, is that of a Comedy, or a fantastic Comedy, until Sir Henry Irving, who was, we believe, the first actor in our own time to break away from the traditional stage representation, produced it on the lines of a Tragedy.

He invested the character of the Jew with so much racial pride and dignity, and with so profound a sense of Shylock's wrongs and the fanatical persecution of his race, that the character became in his hands a revelation—an illuminating exposition, and one of the most impressive tragic figures on the modern stage.

Not from the lines that Shylock speaks can the play be construed as Comedy. He may provoke us to laughter by his rapacity and miserliness, by his cynical retorts and satirical raillery, by his eccentricities alike of speech and manners ; but his lines are tragic : they reek of blood.

The whole composition is built upon the plan of a Tragedy, not of a Comedy. But, studied from the standpoint of its central character, Shylock, and each

character in its due relation to Shylock, the play will be found to be a brilliant satire on the Christianity of the age—a powerful protest against the travesty of Christianity which in its professed followers became a cruel negation of the teaching of the Christ.

The theme of the play is religious bigotry—a powerful indictment against a Christless Christianity, and an eloquent plea for that spirit of Christian charity which had become obscured by passions of the conflict between creed and creed.

This it is which makes the relation and the antagonism between Shylock and Antonio—representative types of Judaism and Christianity. They dominate the stage ; their spirit pervades every line to the end of the Fourth Act. They are distinct types of the religious bigot, and around these revolve the subordinate characters, all of whom are Christians except Shylock's daughter.

Each of them falls under the ban of Shakespeare's condemnation for their religious intolerance which falsified the religion of the Christ they professed. Each stands self-condemned by this action in the play, save Portia, who alone pleads for the despised Jew like a sister of the Christ even as she pleads for the friend of her beloved,

What mercy can you show him, Antonio ?

Let us take the several characters, and examine them solely by their action in the play.

Our impression of *Antonio* is that of a man possessing the attributes of a noble manhood and Christian chivalry. But whence do we obtain that impression ? Is it not created wholly by the speeches of Antonio, and the flattery of his friends ? Stripped of these, and what do we see beneath the thin veneer of words ?—a young man who spits in the face of an old Jew, kicks

him, pulls him by the beard, and spurns him like a dog. And all these base indignities, too, at the hands of a professed Christian, and for no other reason than that he is a Jew.

Take Shylock's own words to Antonio's face, and we discover the undisguised character of the man,

Signior Antonio, many a time and oft  
In the Rialto you have rated me  
About my moneys and my usances :  
Still have I borne it with a patient shrug ;  
For sufferance is the badge of all our tribe.  
You call me misbeliever, cut-throat dog,  
And spit upon my Jewish gaberdine,  
And all for use of that which is mine own.  
Well, then, it now appears, you need my help.  
Go to then ; you come to me and you say,  
" Shylock, we would have moneys," you say so ;  
You that did void your rheum upon my beard  
And foot me as you spurn a stranger cur  
Over your threshold.

And nowhere is the duplicity of Antonio more evident than in his dual relations with Shylock and his Christian friends. So gentle and loving to these ; but to the Jew the bitterest of anti-Semitic persecutors.

Analyze the character of *Bassanio*, another professed Christian—he is a roué. He has squandered his patrimony. He borrows money to sue for the hand of Portia, and scruples not to allow his friend to pledge his life on the venture of a gamble. He, moreover, gives a magnificent banquet to which he invites Shylock, his creditor, with the sole purpose that Bassanio's friend, Lorenzo, may steal away the usurer's daughter, Jessica, with her father's prized ducats and jewels. Then, when by a mere legal flaw the tide of fortune turns against Shylock, he mercilessly pours the vials of his wrath upon him, and exults with a savage glee at his ruin and

degradation, and the deprivation of his faith, which to the Jew was dearer than life itself. This is another type of the Christian which has debased the character of Shylock to a level lower than the brute.

Under the same Christian influence it is that *Jessica* renounces her faith, robs her father, and elopes with Lorenzo.

*Lorenzo*, with all his honied words and melody of love, will not marry Jessica unless she renounces her Jewish faith. He will rob her father of his money and jewels. That does not come within his code of morals. That does not touch his Christian conscience. Yet, despite her desecration alike of the sanctities of home and of religion, the Christians who have degraded and ruined her father now welcome her with not a word of reproach, and without any scruples of conscience.

These are the Gentile Christians who spit upon the old Jew, and flout him, and hurl at him every indignity.

Bitter, lonely, brooding upon these things, strengthens the Jew's obsession till the words,

I can cut out the heart of my enemy,  
become the sole consuming passion of his entire nature.

Such injustice and cruelty might well convert the nature of a dove into that of a dragon.

*Shylock* is the product of the anti-Semitic age in which he lived, of an environment avowedly Christian, but so permeated with the spirit of vindictive racial and religious bigotry as to produce the incarnate devil that he became. He is the monster of mediæval imagination.

It is not the Jewish blood of Shylock, nor his Hebrew religion that has embruted his nature and distorted his character : it is the baneful and demoralizing influence of the malign personalities around him amid which his lost is cast, and whose religious fanaticism has aroused in

him all the malevolency of his splenetic and passionate nature.

This is the obvious cause of Shylock's deep-seated revenge. Take his own words to Antonio's face, already quoted,

Signior Antonio, many a time and oft  
In the Rialto, etc.

Reared in an atmosphere thus vitiated with the violence and ferocity of the mediæval prejudice against the Jews, Shylock could not have become other than what Christian tyranny and the rabid prejudices of his age have made him.

Brutally insulted, spit upon, and spurned like a dog, and that, too, by the followers of Christ, not for any wrong that he had done, but solely on account of his faith and his blood—because he is a Jew; this it is which has perverted his moral sense, and produced in him that indignant hatred against all Christians, whose climax is reached when with fiendish glee he whets his knife on his shoe for the exaction of his bond.

This racial cause of Shylock's hate is nowhere made more obvious than when he discloses to Salanio the true motive of his malevolence.

"He hath disgraced me, and hindered me half a million, laughed at my losses, mocked at my gains, scorned my nation . . . . ."

\* \* \*

The villainy you teach me, I will execute."

"From 1290 until the middle of the 17th Century," writes Dr. G. Brandes, "the Jews were entirely excluded from England. Every prejudice against them was free to flourish unchecked."

Simply as a Jew Shylock was therefore an object of detestation and contemptuous scorn, for was he not the lineal descendant of the actual murderers of Christ?

Moreover, the venom of hatred was intensified tenfold

by his extortionate usury. But without his love for money, and his insatiate greed for gain, Shylock would not have been in keeping with the prevailing character of the Jewish race.

The deep-rooted prejudice against the Jews, which found expression in the inhuman treatment of Shylock, was that which drew out the passionate vengefulness and cruelty of his nature. "He is a sort of tragic symbol of the degradation and vengefulness of an oppressed race."

"He opposed a fanatical Christianity by the fanaticism of Judaism. Was it not the case that every year in Rome, Venice and other places, the Jews were compelled by law to listen to a sermon on their innate depravity, and the necessity for their conversion? Such treatment could only produce one result. Into the warp and woof therefore of Shylock's nature was interwoven a deathless hatred of all that savoured of Christianity, because for him Christianity implied everything that was intolerant and fanatical."\*

Little wonder, then, that pity was utterly alien to his nature. No, there is no pity in his heart. The Vampire of anti-Semitism has sucked from his nature the "milk of human kindness," and inoculated him with the poison of intensest hatred against the anti-Semitic Christianity of his age.

"In his hard, icy intellectuality, and his dry mummy-like tenacity of purpose, with a dash now and then of biting, sarcastic humour, we see the remains of a great and noble nature, out of which all the genial sap of humanity has been pressed by accumulated injuries."

His nature is all afire with a burning indignation against the cruelties which have for ages oppressed and degraded his Nation. And the passionate vehemence

\* Smeaton : "Shakespeare : His Life and Work."

of his racial hatred is but the passionate utterance of a patriotic soul that has risen in revolt against the persecution of his race. Through him his Nation speaks ; through him his Nation hurls its fiercest indictment against intolerant fanaticism of the Christian bigots that professed the faith of Christ, and then tore out the hearts of their brothers in the name of the Christ that died for them.

To the inmost fibre of his being Shylock is a type of his nation's suffering and degradation through long centuries of persecution. Himself an object of bitterest insult and scorn at the hands of the Christians among whom he lived, surrounded by enemies whom he was at once too proud to conciliate, and too weak to oppose, we cannot affect to wonder that the elements of National greatness became petrified into malignity and revenge.

His words and actions all proclaim him to be a Hebrew of the Hebrews, and we cannot fail to perceive the underlying forces of Judaism which impelled him to be what he is. The consuming desire to avenge the wrongs of his race dominates his whole life.

And, thus, as this tragic and impressive figure moves before us we vividly realize, by his every word and gesture, how full charged is his soul with that burning sense of wrong which finds its ultimate expression in those pregnant words of his :

An oath, an oath, I have an oath in Heaven ;

Shall I lay perjury upon my soul ?

“ The moment had arrived when the racial insults and tribal injuries of centuries were to be avenged on a Christian persecutor. He was going to avenge his enemy. Despite the fact that he might be torn to pieces by an indignant populace five minutes later, he was going to exact his revenge, the fulfilment of the bond to the letter.

He is a grim and terrible figure, but he is simply and solely what Christian tyranny and injustice have made him."\*

He is a Hebrew of the Hebrews. His insatiate greed for gain may excite our contempt, provoke us to hate, but his rapacity is characteristic of the Jewish race ; neither does it warrant us in forgetting that the Jew simply demands his due, and has the sanction of the *law* on his side. True to the principles of Judaism, he worships the strict letter of the law. It may not be Christian ethics ; it is certainly Hebrew morality. On the stern literalism of the old Hebrew law—the *Lex talionis*—eye for eye, tooth for tooth, life for life, he stands relentless, inexorable.

Judged therefore from his conception of Jewish morality, he has justice on his side—justice devoid of mercy. "There is," writes Hazlitt, "a strong, deep and quick sense of justice mixed up with the gall and bitterness of his resentment."

In the Trial Scene there is brought into sharp didactic outline the two principles of justice and mercy—of the Old Testament and the New, as Shakespeare read them. Between the antagonism of the two stands Portia, like a sister of the Christ, pleading for a recognition of that beautiful spirit of mercy which makes earthly power likest God's.

When asked

How shalt thou hope for mercy, rendering none ?

he replies, still pleading for the letter above the spirit,

What judgment shall I dread, doing no wrong ?

He stands for *law*, which in its cold rigid abstraction, takes no cognizance of anything outside its pale, and

\* Smeaton—"Shakespeare : His Life and Work."

which would "mitigate the justice of his plea." Why should he be merciful?

On what compulsion must I, tell me that?

And in Portia's immortal lines Shakespeare sets forth the divine side of his lesson :

Therefore, Jew,

Though justice be thy plea, consider this—

That in the course of justice, none of us

Should see salvation : we do pray for mercy,

And the same prayer doth teach us all to render

The deeds of mercy.

But Shylock, insensate as a stone, is unmoved by the soft pleadings of compassion—

My deeds upon my own head ! I crave the *law*.

Thus is presented a striking parallelism between Shakespeare's teaching and that of Saint Paul who had said, "By the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified"; and, "Now are we delivered from the law, that being dead, wherein we were held; that we shall serve in newness of spirit, and not in the oldness of the letter."

Shylock is defeated. Even by the strict letter of his bond he cannot stand. By a verbal flaw it contained no provision for a *bloodless* pound of flesh.

The play, read in the light of the foregoing interpretation, is a brilliant satire on the Christian society of an age that denuded Christianity of Christ, and debased religion to a hollow mockery and the fetish of a repellant Pharisaism.

Thus read, the play is luminous with the deeper significance which lay in the mind of the Poet as he penned one of the greatest satires in the language or literature of the world.

## CHAPTER VIII.

## SHAKESPEARE AND THE CONSCIENCE.

**S**HAKESPEARE is the Poet of Life, as Chaucer was of Love, and as Spenser was of Beauty. He interprets the human heart, translating into unmistakable language those ineradicable principles which regulate the moral being of man.

To him

All the world's a stage  
And all the men and women merely players.  
They have their exits and their entrances,  
And each one in his turn plays many parts.

And in the drama of life he saw with a seer's vision the springs of human action.

Across the stage there pass before him a motley crowd of men and women, subject as all are to human passions, and cast very much in the same average mould of humanity as ourselves.

And across the pages of his writings are luminously written the lessons, that unbridled passions lead to tragic issues—damnation, madness and death ; but that moral restraint purifies the emotions, and elevates to loftier heights, adding to the sum of human happiness, thus making for the highest good of mankind.

We rebut the amazing statement of Dr. Samuel Johnson, that "Shakespeare seems to write without any moral purpose." We submit that there are passages in his writings which might give colour to such a judgment.

In his dramas there are characters admittedly base, as there are actions *contra bonos mores*. But where would be the ethical value of his teaching if such characters were expunged from the pages of his plays ?

They reflect, as in a mirror, the social life and manners of the particular period portrayed. And without such characters no drama is possible whether in art or in real life. It is the antagonism of the evil which brings out the action of the good, and without such antagonism virtue would be valueless and Heaven unattainable. For, in the ethical world, the perfection of moral character can be attained only along the path of triumphant victory over the forces of evil.

In accordance with the canons of dramatic art, Shakespeare's characters speak and act in strict conformity with the conditions of the times in which they lived. He does not attribute to one age the proprieties and conventionalities indigenous to another. His characters—of which there are over seven hundred—are all faithful transcripts from life. No *dilettante* was he. He is the world's greatest painter of the *soul* of man ; the great anatomist of the human heart which he lays bare to us in all its primordial passions of love and grief and fear and hate. He " holds the mirror up to nature," and shows us in all its naked truth as well the grossness as the goodness of the heart of man.

He teaches us nobly and delicately what we are, what we should be, and what we may become. His characters are not caricatures, but portraitures of flesh and blood vividly drawn with that unflinching veracity of statement which we demand of the prophet, the facing of the facts of life as they are, not as we should like them to be.

Much coarseness there is, we admit ; many blots—frailties of the time—there are, which we would fain expunge from the pages of his writings. But they are survivals from a more free-spoken or less refined age. He lived in an outspoken age when the grossness of the time was not veiled under the thin veneer of our more refined and artificial civilization. The tone of social life was extremely low, and the stage corrupt to its core.

Little wonder, then, that his pages are sometimes blurred by indecencies. But they are as spots on the sun : they do not in any way diminish his glory, nor detract one iota from the moral beauty of his teaching as a whole. The coarseness is the *vitium temporis* more than the *vitium hominis*. He never stoops so low as to "paint the gates of Hell with Paradise, clothing vice in the garb of attraction." He never juggles with the moral law, or sophisticates his reader's conscience. He teaches us that man is potentially a saint or a devil ; that by the power of volition he can be either : the choice is his. Truly does he make Iago say

'Tis in ourselves that we are thus or thus.

"It is certainly not without design," says Gervinus, "that Shakespeare has placed in the lips of just the most detestable of his characters, Iago and Edmund, strikingly distinct precepts, namely, that it lies in our own free will that we are thus or thus, and that it is not practicable to impute our base actions to causes lying without us."

In this, Shakespeare is at one with the Pauline doctrine which makes a man a free agent in the exercise of his own will in relation to virtue and vice, and that the will must be disciplined in strict obedience to the inward law of his being—the conscience. Hence, as in Christian ethics, we do not bend our conscience to our will, but our will to our conscience ; and that on this rests man's responsibility in action and passion.

Now, conscience, as an essential factor in human analysis, plays an important part in the action of Shakespeare's dramas. This is a distinguishing characteristic of Shakespearean ethics—that man, on whose soul is impressed the Image of his Maker, has within him the ineradicable sense of the eternal distinction between right and wrong ; that conscience speaks even in the guiltiest. And it is this fidelity to

nature which makes Shakespeare pre-eminently a moral teacher for all time.

He possessed a prophetic insight into the human heart, by which he read with unerring accuracy the motives of men's actions.

He draws aside the curtain from the stage of life, and his characters—God's men and women—coming down to the footlights lay bare their souls to us, and speak to us of the mysteries and wonders and beauties of life ; of its heart-aches and its love-pangs, of its death-agonies, its hopes and longings, its trials and its temptations.

His characters are, therefore, not stage puppets, but men and women of flesh and blood consciously accountable to a Supreme Being, to whom conscience is the Final Court of Appeal in all matters of human conduct.

We sometimes say of a bad man, "he has no conscience." This is a gratuitous statement wholly devoid of truth. It is merely a colloquialism, a rhetorical hyperbole. Even the devil has a conscience, for "the devils believe and tremble." And no writer has more powerfully vindicated the existence and power of conscience, nor depicted in a more lurid light the tortures of a guilty conscience. Forth from his pages there flash in awful and vivid illumination the agonies of the guilt-stricken heart. With a Seer's vision he saw into the terrible working of the law of retribution.

With him the law of retributive justice is inexorable. The criminal is never immune from the punishment of his sin as the natural and inevitable outcome of human deeds. "It comes from the faith that blood cruelly or unjustly spilt on the ground has power to draw God's hand upon the guilty—that we are not under a reign of chance, but in a moral universe governed by a moral law-giver. It shows that 'the way of transgressors is hard,' and that the recoil of the transgressor's wrong-

doing smites him with the hand of its own terrible revenge. In all Shakespeare's greater plays justice brings penalty on the evil-doer. No power can cajole it, or make iniquity permanently prosper."

With what incomparable power of tragic intensity is this worked out in the Tragedy of Macbeth? "The book of fate," as has been truly said, "seems open before us, while the blasts of Hell drive its leaves backwards and forwards with awful violence."

### I.—LADY MACBETH.

In all literature, one of the most affecting and heart-rending scenes ever drawn by a Poet-hand of a soul tortured with the agonies of a sin-stricken conscience is that of *Lady Macbeth*.

It is the picture of a mind haunted with the remembrance of a deed that is ceaselessly gnawing at her heart, and fast consuming her life. She is suffering from the effects of that fatal night when, with a fiendish casuistry, and a superhuman energy, she hurled her husband over the precipice which for ever sealed his fate and hers.

Our ideal conception of Lady Macbeth is not that springing from the intrinsic and poetical construction of the character, but rather from that vulgarism of the stage, which too often has represented her as nothing less than a species of demoniacal fury brandishing a couple of daggers, and instigating her husband to butcher an innocent king; in fact, a devil incarnate, divested of every trace of womanhood and humanity.

This is not the character delineated by Shakespeare. In abjuring her womanhood she does violence to her own nature. She may invoke the hellish spirits to unsex her, and to fill her from the crown to the toe top-full of direst cruelty! But she cannot wholly unsex herself. In her moments of supremest demoniacal ferocity she unconsciously reveals to us the tender

redeeming touches of *womanhood*. In her breast there lie concealed some drops of the "milk of human kindness."

For instance, when invoking the spirits,

Come to my woman's breasts,

And take my milk for gall, you murdering ministers—  
And again,

I have given suck, and know

How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me.

Through the moral blackness which enshrouds her we catch an occasional glimpse of the *woman* in all her dearest attributes ; we view her through the medium of a soft halo mellowing in its radiance the stern ruggedness of her harsher nature.

"The compunctious visitings of nature," which she abjures, shake her soul when, at the moment of extremest horror, she is about to stab the sleeping King, in whose placid features she traces the image of a loved father, which awakens in her the instincts of womanhood, unnerves her hand and arrests the fatal blow :—

Had he not resembled my father as he slept

I had done't.

Yes, she may imprecate the "mortal spirits" to

Stop up the access and passage to remorse,  
but they are impotent to close the avenues of her heart  
against

The compunctious visitings of nature ;  
they are powerless to obliterate in her soul those moral and spiritual impulses which render her amenable to a Supreme Lawgiver, for on her soul is engraven, deep and ineffaceable, the Image of God which is the common heritage of man.

Conscience, however dormant, must awake in her some time or other, and with it a terrible remorse, closed by despair, and despair by death.

That remorse which in *Macbeth* she had derided as "the very painting of his fear" finds, at last, its way into her own bosom.

She who had thought to silence his alarmed conscience by the boastful assurance that "a little water clears us of this deed," lives to find that the powers of Hell cannot prevail to "stop up the access and passage to remorse" in her own soul; that not even "all the perfumes of Arabia" can avail to cleanse her hand of the sickening taint of blood. The blood is washed from her hands; ah, yes! but it has dropped into her soul.

She sleeps and dreams, and in her sleep and dreams she re-enacts with pathetic and painful insistence the soul-harrowing scene of the murder.

In the immortal "Sleep-walking Scene" we descend from the level of poetry to that of prose, as more congenial with the stern literalness and reality of murder, and its consequent tragic intensity of mental agony and mental horror.

Here we have a glimpse into the depths of that inward hell: the seared brain and broken heart are laid bare before us in all the helplessness of slumber.

The torture of her mind is rendered trebly poignant by the prolonged insomnia which saps the forces of her mind. In remorseful days and sleepless nights Nemesis exacts from her the full penalty of violated law.

She seeks her couch after the turmoil of the day; but sleep brings with it no repose. She has murdered sleep. She is piteously afflicted by the memory of a blood-stain upon her hand. With sightless eyes she nightly walks, rubbing her hands in the vain effort to wipe out the ineffaceable stains—those damning records—of human blood:—

Here's the smell of the blood still!

All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this  
Little hand!

No, she shall sleep no more. "Here's a spot." It will not out; it defies effacement. Night after night she has washed it, too; and, yet, it is still there, deep-sunk into her soul.

She enacts over again the scenes of bloody intrigue. Conscience revives in her the memory of a deed that has eaten into her brain, and corroded her heart. The pent-up agony of her soul is told when the will is sleeping. "The chaos within is revealed which all the tortures of the rack could not have drawn from her in conscious life. Helpless, unconscious, the will power dormant she tells it all: "the Thane of Fife had a wife: where is she now?" How changed the meaning of the old words, "what's done cannot be undone." Alas! it cannot, and she gives over the struggle. A little while, and that miserable breast with all its accumulation of remorse, of disappointment, is lifeless.

And how piteous the appeal uttered on her behalf out of the agonizing depths of her husband's despair:—

Canst thou not minister to a mind diseased,  
Pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow,  
Raze out the written troubles of the brain;  
And, with some sweet oblivious antidote,  
Cleanse the stuff'd bosom of that perilous stuff  
Which weighs upon the heart?

No, her disease transcends the therapeutic skill of mortal man. No medicine in the world can

Purge her disease to a sound and pristine health, for in her breast burn the fires of Hell lit by the hand of a pitiless remorse; in her distracted brain rise the phantoms of the murdered dead which have for ever robbed her of sleep, and destroyed her frail life.

"The death of Macbeth, fighting bravely to the end with the harness on his back, is Elysium compared with the Gehenna fires of unnamed dread, amid which Lady Macbeth passes into Silence!

"The deaths of these two great personages reach the highest plane of tragic terror achieved in the literature of the world. The remorse fires of Hell literally burned her reason away."\*

\* Smeaton: "Life of Shakespeare."

"It is the Queen," writes Dowden, "and not her husband who is slain by conscience."

There is nothing in all literature more affecting in its pathos than those words of hers which bespeak the anguished mind and the broken heart.

## II.—MACBETH.

In her consort, *Macbeth*, there is pictured to us in lurid illumination the horrors of a guilt-stricken conscience scourging the offender with whips and scorpions, and making the murderer his own executioner.

When the suggestion of murder is first present to his mind we hear even then, amid the tumult of his contending thoughts, the ominous whispers of his alarmed conscience:

Why do I yield to that suggestion  
Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair  
And make my seated heart knock at my ribs  
Against the use of nature? Present fears  
Are less than horrible imaginings:  
My thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical  
Shakes so my single state of man that function  
Is smothered in surmise, and nothing is  
But what is not.

But he heeds them not. As Coleridge remarks, "conscience distinctly warns him, but he lulls it imperfectly":—

If chance will have me King, why, chance may crown me  
Without my stir.

Again in Macbeth's speech:—

We will proceed no further in this business:  
He hath honoured me of late; and I have bought  
Golden opinions from all sorts of people  
Which would be worn now in their newest gloss,  
Not cast aside so soon.

He betrays a twinge of conscience, a restraining power, but which he culpably interpreted into prudential reasons. He juggles with conscience, and by plausible sophistry deludes himself into a false security, by attributing to "chance" the power to crown him king.

He tries to persuade himself that a blind fatalism will pave his way to the throne "without his stir." He dallies with the Tempter until, in spite of twinges of conscience and spasms of fear, the evil thought becomes the wish, and the wish the murderous purpose, till, goaded on by the juggling prophecy of the witches, and the inflexible determination of his wife, he commits the abhorrent, irrevocable deed, whose accomplishment thereafter destroys for ever his peace of mind, and ruthlessly rushes him on with daring impetuosity to his final doom.

Here is sin in its inception.

No sooner does he enter on the path of crime than conscience dogs his every step. This mighty voice of his conscience, stifled by a powerful will, yields to his daring, but it is still acting and resisting to the last moment.

The deed of murder being now a fixed purpose in his mind, his burning brain is filled with terrible phantoms. Before the actual commission of the crime, as he gropes his way through the darkness of the night to the fatal chamber, he sees in the grim horror of affrighted sense an "air-drawn dagger" floating in the lurid light before his eyes, its blade and hilt stained with "gouts of blood"—the bodiless creation of remorse and fear.

Then, the deed done, a terrible remorse seizes him. "Like the trumpet-tongue of an accusing angel it beats on his heated brain and freezes it with horror," as he returns to his partner in crime, the air reverberating with the hollow voices of the sleeping grooms :—

Methought I heard a voice cry, "Sleep no more !  
Macbeth doth murder sleep," the innocent sleep ;  
Sleep that knits up the ravelled sleave of care,  
The death of each day's life, sore labour's bath,  
Balm of hurt minds, great nature's second course,  
Chief nourisher in life's feast.  
Still it cried, Sleep no more ! To all the house.

Then, above the wild beating of his heart, he hears aloud the pronouncement of his doom,

Glamis hath murdered sleep ; and therefore Cawdor

Shall sleep no more ; Macbeth shall sleep no more.

Hell for him has begun. Haggard and tottering, he returns from the fatal chamber his soul so shaken with ghastly horror at the sight of his bloody "hangman's hands," that they pluck out his eyes ; and to wash them would dye blood-red the multitudinous seas.

Listen, as confronted with the awful ghastliness of his crime, he piteously exclaims,

Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood

Clean from my hand ? No, this my hand will rather

The multitudinous seas incarnardine

Making the green—one red.

He has murdered king Duncan ; he has grasped the coveted crown ; and still amid the glare and glitter and glamour of lights and flowers and music, and women in festive attire, he sees the ghost—the shadow of his blood-stained conscience.

Yes, at the Banquet, the Nemesis of his guilt conjures up before him the phantoms of the dead, at the sight of which even the valiant Macbeth is shaken with a terrified sense of nervous horror. Bold as a man, and valiant as a warrior, yet now he is terror-stricken and appalled at the terrible vision of Banquo's gory head.

Take any shape but that, and my firm nerves

Shall never tremble : or be alive again,

And dare me to the desert with thy sword :

If trembling I inhabit them, protest me

The baby of a girl. Hence, terrible shadow !

Unreal mockery, hence !

"And when the pleasure has been tasted, and is gone, and nothing is left of the crime but the ruin it has wrought, then, too, the Furies take their seats upon the midnight pillow."

Here is the Nemesis of Sin.

Upon him has fallen the curse of a criminal desire, criminally fulfilled, and for which he can find no healing

balm ; only mental anguish, bitter disillusionment, unutterable and infidel despair, until there falls upon his life the curtain of the final retributive and moral catastrophe.

How agonizing is the anguish of the heart from out whose depths is wrung the passionate utterance of despair :—

Better be with the dead  
Whom we to gain our peace have sent to peace  
Than on the torture of the mind to lie  
In restless ecstasy.

Here is the disillusionment of sin.

Macbeth has murdered sleep, and with it all faith and hope. Life to him is now meaningless, and the future wrapped in impenetrable gloom. He finds, too late, that he has been tricked by

The equivocation of the fiend  
That lies like truth.

It is the picture of a man plunged into Hadean depths of infidel despair ; but God is not in the picture. Almost the last voice from his weary and sin-tortured soul is that in which he “ blots out all thought of a future life, because he dare not ponder it.”

To-morrow, and to-morrow and to-morrow,  
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day  
To the last syllable of recorded time  
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools  
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle  
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player  
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage  
And then is heard no more ; it is a tale  
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,  
Signifying nothing.

Here is the despair of the infidel.

As an analysis of human character, Macbeth is the most wonderful thing Shakespeare ever wrote.

“ The progress of Macbeth in crime,” wrote Thomas Campbell, “ is an unparalleled lecture in *ethical* anatomy.”

Nowhere, outside Greek drama, do we find painted in such painfully lurid colours, nor depicted with such

tragic intensity, the retributive workings of the inexorable law of the moral world, that

Even-handed justice  
Commends the ingredients of the poisoned chalice  
To our own lips.

### III.—HAMLET.

Hamlet's was a nature which needed a personal centre in which faith and affection could unite. He lost the former which involved the loss of the latter, hence the life-weariness in which his soul found expression. And as the soul in its yearnings reaches out through the human to the Divine, so Hamlet sought in the reflex images of the Divine for what was of highest intrinsic worth and dignity. On man he had reposed his faith, which, when it had lost its hold, clung with a yet firmer tenacity to the Divine.

The religion of Hamlet consists in a devout belief in God, and as a necessary sequence, in God's vicegerent—the conscience, whose monitions he felt himself constrained to obey. In his spiritual conflicts he makes reiterated appeals to it, as the Supreme Tribunal and the Final Court of Appeal in all matters of human conduct, and as that which alone takes cognizance of acts on ethical grounds.

And it is of the utmost significance, as illustrating the intention of Shakespeare, that these reiterated appeals to the moral sense are among the final and illuminating touches of the Poet.

The visible workings of conscience in the mind of Hamlet are sufficiently obvious throughout the play. For instance, in his first soliloquy, when contemplating suicide as a welcome means of escape from his life-weariness, the deterrent force is God's "canon 'gainst self-slaughter" :—

O, that this too too solid flesh would melt,  
 Thaw and resolve itself into a dew  
 Or that the Everlasting had not fixed  
 His canon 'gainst self-slaughter.

Here is a noble vindication of the power of conscience asserting a Divine law which demands obedience, and, by obeying which, Hamlet achieved a moral victory.

In Macbeth, we hear the same voice asserting its right of appeal against the criminal suggestion projected into his mind, but it is stifled by the supremacy of a dominant passion to which Macbeth fell a victim.

Again, at the end of the Second Act, conscience raises in his mind the suspicion, that the spirit he had seen might be none other than the devil himself luring him on to destruction by the subtle suggestion of revenge :

The spirit that I have seen  
 May be the devil : and the devil hath power  
 T' assume a pleasing shape ; yea, and perhaps,  
 Out of my weakness and my melancholy,  
 (As he is very potent with such spirits)  
 Abuses me to damn me.

What a faithful transcript from human life ! Our spiritual adversary often approaches us as an angel of light, the better to beguile, and at a time when the soul is specially susceptible to temptation. Such a parallel we find in the Divine Life.

Again, in the soliloquy, "To be, or not to be," what is it but the secret voice of that inner monitor that dominates Hamlet's will, and operates to stay his hand from voluntarily launching him into the boundless Unknown ?—

But that the dread of something after death—  
 The undiscover'd country from whose bourn  
 No traveller returns—puzzles the will  
 And makes us rather bear those ills we have  
 Than fly to others that we know not of.  
 Thus conscience does make cowards of us all ;  
 And thus the native hue of resolution  
 Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,  
 And enterprises of great pith and moment  
 With this regard their currents turn awry  
 And lose the name of action.

Yet, strangely enough, Hamlet has been accused here of "degrading conscience into identity with the dread of something after death."

But, is it not the preventive function of conscience to inspire with a feeling of dread when contemplating an action which would involve a breach of Divine law? Bishop Butler, at least, thought so, identifying conscience with a "presentiment of what is to be, hereafter."

Hamlet interrogates the human spirit in its still place of judgment, and he gives its verdict with a sigh of reluctance :—

Thus conscience does make cowards of us all.

Moreover, if as he confesses, he has "cause and will and strength and means" to accomplish the deed of revenge, what dominates all these to the neglect of the "dread command"? Is it, he asks,

Bestial oblivion, or some craven scruple  
Of thinking too precisely on the event?

If, *ex hypothesi*, it be the latter, could Shakespeare have put into more precise language the nature of that moral faculty of *reflection*, whose tendency is to restrain from wrong-doing, and to arrest the erring step?

Notwithstanding, some of the greatest commentators have taken Hamlet to task not for thinking too little, but too much, thus "crippling the power of action." Assuming the irresolution theory, they find a plausible explanation of Hamlet's non-fulfilment of the obligation of revenge, not in mental inertness, but in too great mental activity. They tell us that he "procrastinates from thought"; that he has a "calculating consideration that cripples the power of action"; or, that he has "an excess of the reflective tendency." And because the decision of Hamlet's mind, consequent upon his "thinking too precisely upon the event," leads him to repudiate the temptation involved in the command to kill, he is unjustly described as "irresolute," and around

this doctrine of "irresolution" they weave the most elaborate metaphysical theories.

"The craven scruple"—the conscience—that is the primary cause of his irresolution. That is the deterrent force operating in his mind against "self-slaughter"; that causes his sworn resolve to grow faint from an imbecility of purpose; that raises in his mind the suspicion that the ghost-story may be forced upon his credulity by the devil to drive him to a deed of desperation; that calls for a confirmation of the play, for evil spirits may have abused him to damn him; and that begets the apathy of oblivion.

In his conscience lies the origin of those doubts and perplexities in the matter of revenge, and renders him a coward. And, yet, Hamlet was no coward. We repudiate the imputation of cowardice, both moral and physical. For instance, on the platform, in the presence of the Ghost, while his companions are "distilled almost to jelly with the act of fear," his each petty artery is as hardy as the Nemean lion's nerve. "I do not set my life at a pin's fee," he exclaims, "and for my soul what can it do to that being a thing immortal as itself?"

What, then, restrained him, when "examples gross as earth" exhorted him; when filial love cried out for revenge?

It was the power of conscience which steadfastly refused to contemplate the killing of the King, as incompatible with his stern moral sense of duty, and was swift to repel any invasion of its domain.

The terrible impulsion to evil by the suggested assassination of his uncle, under the guise of filial duty, was that which gave rise in his soul to the fierce conflict between the antagonistic forces of good and evil.

The key to the solution of Hamlet's life and conduct is to be found in the inscrutable depths of every soul, in those undying instincts of the spirit of man—the conscience—in obedience to whose behests Hamlet

rose triumphant over those spiritual forces within, which traitorously conspired with outward circumstances to betray him.

#### IV.—RICHARD III.

That monster of iniquity, *Richard III.*, ascended the throne steeped in human blood. Men, women and children were alike ruthlessly slaughtered for the attainment of his ignoble and bloody ends. He has a passionate scorn of men, a cynical contempt of human life. He therefore pauses at no obstacle to achieve a purpose, and at no result, however revolting, does he ever relent.

Behind his deformed and withered body there is such a dæmonic intensity of will and intellect as to render him at once an appalling and sublime figure.

With sardonic humour he mocks at the grim irony of Nature which has so deformed and mis-shapen his body as to make him the scorn and derision of his enemies, and to provoke the very dogs to bark as he halts by them.

The thought, like an irritant poison in his veins, inflames his blood with the vindictive passion of revenging himself upon the injustice of Nature by proving himself a villain. His deformity he will henceforth use as a weapon to goad him on in his career of villainy :—

I that am rudely stamp'd, and want love's majesty,  
To strut before a wanton ambling nymph ;  
I that am curtailed of this fair proportion,  
Cheated of feature by dissembling nature,  
Deform'd, unfinished, sent before my time  
Into this breathing world, scarce half made up,  
And that so lamely and unfashionable,  
That dogs bark at me as I halt by them ;  
Why I, in this weak piping time of peace,  
Have no delight to pass away the time  
Unless to see my shadow in the sun,  
And descant on mine own deformity :

And therefore since I cannot prove a lover,  
 To entertain these fair well-spoken days,  
 I am determined to prove a villain,  
 And hate the idle pleasures of these days.

He is supreme in his dæmonic power of dissimulation. He is a consummate actor, united to which his plastic and commanding intellect amply suffice for his rapid transitions in personating whether saint or sinner, statesman or soldier, lover or hypocrite. And to such a height does he carry the art of dissimulation that, in body and soul a devil, he can when occasion demands, appear like an angel of light.

"In hypocrisy," says Schlegel, "he is particularly fond of using religious forms, as if actuated by a desire of profaning in the service of Hell the religion whose blessings he had inwardly abjured."

He is an incarnate Devil. And so vividly outstanding are the diabolical outlines of his character as portrayed by Shakespeare, that it is ingeniously suggested by Drake that they must have furnished Milton with many of the striking features of his own Satanic portrait.

Yet, devil though he be in human form, immersed as is his whole soul in guilt of deepest dye, he cannot stifle within him the upbraidings of conscience. Trumpet-tongued, they proclaimed aloud to Heaven his iniquities, and smote his brain with scorpion strokes.

Richard, despite his colossal power of intellect, his diabolical ingenuity and his supreme disdain of the moral law, is impotent to lay the ghosts of the murdered dead, which Nemesis conjures up before him in that moral Gehenna into which he had guiltily plunged himself.

The ghosts of Prince Edward, Henry IV., Clarence, Rivers, Vaughan, Grey, Hastings, Edward V., and the Duke of York (the two young princes), his wife, Lady Anne, and Buckingham, are the admonitions of his own guilty conscience.

Each night they turn his courage into cowardice—a superstitious dread, which wholly unmans him till the day dawn, and Richard is himself again.

“He has a fierce joy,” says Dowden, “and he is an intense believer—in the creed of Hell. And, therefore, he is strong. He inverts the moral order of things, and tries to live in this inverted system. He does not succeed : he dashes himself to pieces against the laws of the world which he has outraged.”\*

The truly terrible, awe-inspiring scene in the play is not the death of Richard, but the tent scene, when his own conscience calls up before him the vision of his crimes, and for a brief space the curtain of the soul is lifted, and we shrink in horror from the vision of that inward Hell which every doer of evil carries within his breast ; and the fire of whose torment no outward thing can avail to quench or to allay.

In his tent, on the eve of battle, he is arraigned before the bar of retributive justice. Confronted with the phantom forms of those he has murdered, he exclaims :—

O coward conscience, how dost thou afflict me !

\* \* \*

My conscience hath a thousand several tongues

And every tongue brings in a several tale

And every tale condemns me for a villain.

Perjury, perjury, in the high'st degree.

Murder, stern murder in the dir'st degree ;

All several sins, all us'd in each degree

Throng to the bar, crying all—Guilty ! Guilty !

It is the last night of his life. He is alone in his tent. Throwing himself upon his couch, he tries to sleep. But, like Macbeth, he, too, has murdered sleep ! The load of conscious guilt lies too heavy upon his soul. Spectral visions of the murdered dead rise before him, lurid and fiendlike, to torture his frenzied brain. Within him burn the fires of hell which he himself had

kindled, until, affrighted by a merciless remorse, he springs from his couch stricken with a superstitious dread, and cries out :

Shadows to-night

Have struck more terror to the soul of Richard,  
Than can the substance of ten thousand soldiers  
Armèd in proof, and led by shallow Richmond.

He who had contemptuously boasted that he never "shed remorseful tear," is now awed into abject terror, as he stands convicted before the bar of a guilty conscience. It is the vivid picture of a man seen writhing in Hadean depths in the agony of remorse. His mental anguish is betrayed by the cold fearful drops which stand on his trembling flesh.

What is all this other than the power of conscience which is ineradicable from the human soul ?

#### V.—HENRY IV.

The same retributive power of conscience haunts the spirit and disturbs the rest of *Henry IV.*, outwardly successful though he is even to the end.

It is immediately after Richard's death that conscience, roused from its lethargic slumber, hung like a Nemesis over his head.

With what bitterness of anguish he looks back upon the tragedy that has closed the life of Richard whose deposition and death demand atonement. Under the stimulus of remorse he is impelled to make a Crusade to the Holy Land, largely to expiate the once-suggested deed of bloodshed :—

I protest my soul is full of woe,  
That blood should sprinkle me to make it grow :  
Come, mourn with me for that I do lament  
And put on sullen black incontinent :  
I'll make a voyage to the Holy Land  
To wash this blood from off my guilty hand.

Fain would he persuade himself that his elevation to the throne was blameless :—

That necessity so bowed the state  
That I and greatness were compelled to kiss.

But by no such plausible sophistry, or self-delusion, can he allay the disquieting thoughts which afflict his mind. He cannot thus lightly juggle with the moral law.

And when, in the evening of his life, success comes in the conquest of his enemies, how pathetic is his lament :—

Will fortune never come with both hands full,  
But write her fair words still in foulest letters ?

His strength is worn out in the struggle ; and in the final scene with his son there is forced from his dying lips the long-withheld confession of wrong-doing.

The retributive anguish of remorse intensifies as death draws near. Conscience revives in him the memory of former days when, with blood-stained hands, he seized the crown, and which now he would fain forget but cannot. It forces upon him the apprehension that all his misfortunes are a merited punishment from the Hand of God.

In his last moments, with the death-dew upon his brow, he is arraigned before the bar of conscience. No juggling then. In the unutterable bitterness of his soul he exclaims :—

God knows, my son,  
By what by-paths and indirect crook'd ways  
I met this crown ; and I myself know well  
How troublesome it sat upon my head.

And with his dying breath he pleads forgiveness :—

How came I by the crown, O God forgive.

And, thus, instances might be multiplied in which Shakespeare, true to the inexorable law of man's moral nature, vividly paints for us with the matchless skill of his transcendent genius the power and terror of conscience.

"Reason and conscience," writes Gervinus, "are to be the rulers in the community of our inward being, who are to restrain the storms of passion. Shakespeare liked that purity of morals which has passed through struggles and temptations, not the virtue of habit, but of principle, not instinctive but tested, the product of the reason and of volition.

"The law of conscience, which is a sure spark and remnant of the original purity of man, this 'deity in our bosom,' Shakespeare has bestowed intentional distinctness even upon his most abandoned villains, and that, too, when they deny it : to nourish this spark, and not to quench it, is the loud sermon of all his works."\*

In his deepest-dyed villain, he lifts the veil and shows us the soul in some hour of his life quivering under the eyes of God.

Thus he vindicates the power and existence of that inner voice which is to be found in the soul of every man made in the Image of the Eternal God.

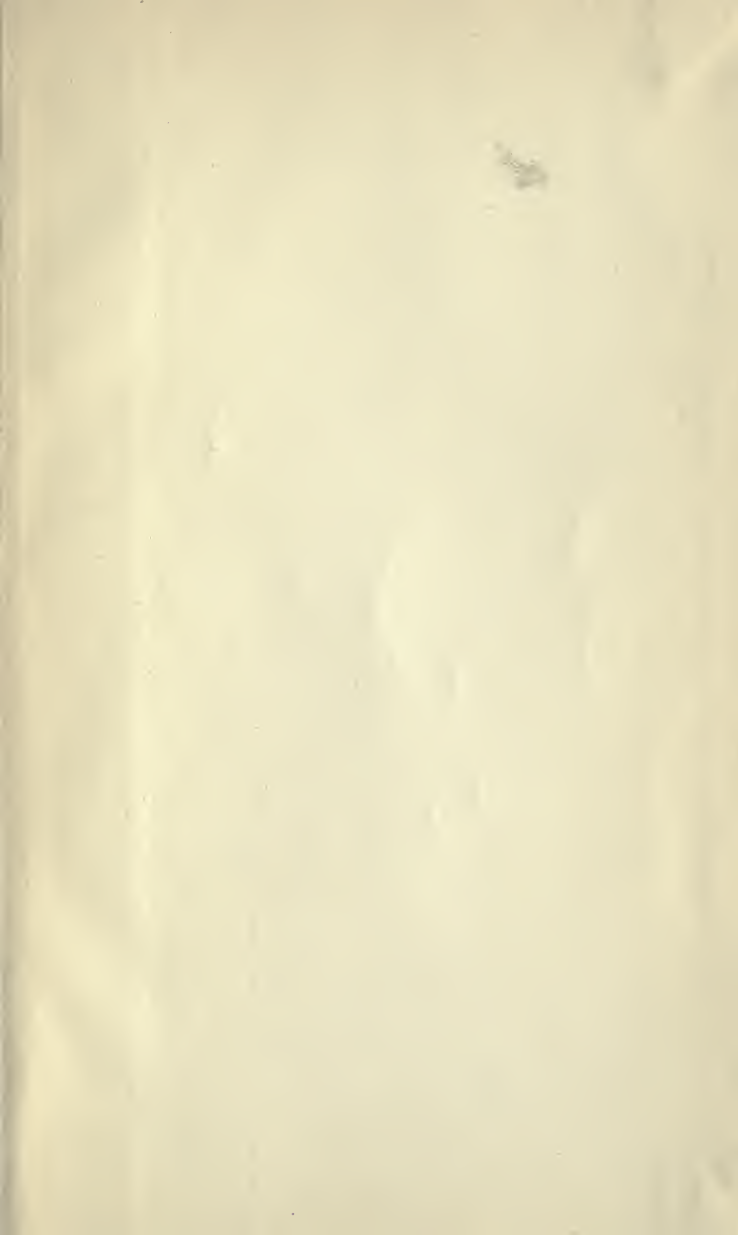
Seared though the conscience may be as with a hot iron ; unfathomably low the depths to which a man may be dragged by a career of crime ; yet, there are moments in his life when that secret voice within him will awake with a terrible power from its drugged and drowsy slumberings to torment and torture him.

No soul so damned but it retains, though it be but the faint echoes of, that deathless voice which God has implanted in the human breast.

• This is the teaching, this is the genius of Shakespeare.

\* "Shakespeare Commentaries."

*Finis.*



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